

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Music video: messages and structures

by Deborah H. Holdstein

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POLITICS, FANTASIES, AND STARMAKING

"I think video plays a big part ... gives the band more of an identity ... If a band's personality comes across, they're ultimately much stronger. Bands must take performance into account nowadays when they present themselves to the public. The [video] clips make you more accessible to the fans. When they come to a performance, then they bring or wear things they've seen in the video."[\(1\)](#)

Featured performer in the Australian group Men at Work, Cohn Hay thus finds rock video important to the promotion of a group's image as well as its music. His views emphasize precisely how powerfully the new medium enhances the already potent chemistry of music industry mythmaking. Hay notes the need for a "sense of performance." Now that music video has pulled the record business from its worst slump in years, a star's video image could be the crucial difference between a mediocre and exciting video — and a mediocre or exciting career.

Moreover, this "sense of performance" distinguishes the more successful music videos from others — in terms of composition, lighting, mise-en-scene, and the need to use or reject the song's narrative as the foundation for the film's visual backdrop. Most important, however, artists with any amount of creative control over the content and "look" of their videos become responsible for helping to create a video artwork instead of a mere taped performance. They also can create their own screen persona — a powerful, influential presence with genre-specific and political implications.[\(2\)](#)

In this, music videos appear to echo the starmaking machinery of the 1930s and 1940s studio system. The major studios and stars cultivated the mythic personae with which they would be identified — elegant, witty Cary Grant; elegant, cool-if-suffering Joan Crawford. So, too, have

the music stars featured in more carefully constructed videos begun to create screen and, by extension, music personalities. In the past, these personae might be left more fully to the imagination, or reinforced only through more traditional, visually substantiated forms of public display—the concert, the record album cover pose, photographs and interviews in *Rolling Stone*, *Time*, and so on. But the video image is quicker and more potent. Rather than waiting for documentaries and concert performances to record and reveal Mick Jagger's "demonic" persona, the immediacy of television brings the chosen visual personae of Michael Jackson, Donna Summer, David Bowie, and endless other stars and would-be stars through our cable and commercial channels. And for artists successful enough to assume at least some creative input — we can assume this about Jackson, Summer, and Bowie, for example — these images telescope the mythmaking process. The video images leave us with interesting implications about the star's "image" that go beyond the powers of publicists and the usual starmaking system.

Videos by Jackson, Summer, and Bowie are among the best of a very large group. Yet even within this relatively small sample, the visual and content goals of these videos seem to divide into two categories: those with allegedly explicit "political" themes, and those which revive the traditional U.S. film musical and represent its newest incarnation. Many others fall into still another category: the fantasy video, based entirely or in part on the spirit and lyrics of the song being performed. Such a format puts the group or star in a mythical, medieval, primitive/exotic or surrealistic series of images and locations.⁽³⁾ These categories in no way reflect all of music video, of course. In fact many groups' videos capitalize quite blatantly on the stereotypes and situations of old and new Hollywood at its worst — exotic women savages, surrealism without Buñuel's creative savoir faire, and endless variations on computer, STAR WARS, and knight sagas of medieval times.⁽⁴⁾

For the purposes of this analysis, I'll concentrate on videos by Michael Jackson, Donna Summer, and David Bowie, and the ways in which these representative tapes reveal three striking qualities:

1. the star as fantasy "seer" or prophet;
2. the star as political commentator or narrator;
3. the star as mediator and point of resolution for social conflict.

Each of these qualities bears notable implications within these videos: the last has a particularly resonant parallel to the U.S. film musical. In this genre, conflicts of love and career, for example, become resolved through song and dance, most often through the initiative of one person, the star. While many videos' vision of the star-as-mediator figure finds its source — the powerful, invincible star — in the work of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, the star is transformed. The mediator, in several rock videos, has become a surreal, "fantasy" figure, involved yet detached from the action s/he seems to resolve. And interestingly, even those videos we can call "political" find their star(s) strangely removed from what appears to be the purpose of the visual text, undercutting whatever

political message it might have had to offer.(5)

"WORDS, WORDS ... TALK, TALK, TALK.

WE DIDN'T NEED WORDS — WE HAD FACES:"

(Gloria Swanson as SUNSET BOULEVARD's Norma Desmond, has-been movie star of the silent era.)

Michael Jackson's video to his hit song, "Beat It," provides an excellent example of homage featuring a fantasy seer/mediator/star. The words of the song, while sympathetic with the visual imagery, are secondary to the storytelling visuals of the video. It doesn't need words, really. It has faces, gestures, emphasis, and a narrative one could easily follow without "Beat It" on the soundtrack.

The visuals open before the ominous double chords of the song's opening measures, a fitting, vivid start to the scene's attempt at ON THE WATERFRONT seamy naturalism. We see several men, who we will learn are members of a gang about to meet their rivals for a "rumble." They rise from their seats at a coffee shop. Visually, the men are tightly framed on the far right-hand side of the screen, hemmed in by the long counter and chairs of the cafe as they leave. The tinkling of glasses and silverware in the background helps set the realism of the scene; not until the men slam the door behind them do the chords begin. By the second set of the minor-key chords, we've crosscut twice: First, there is a lineup of one gang's members, their bodies effectively hidden in shadow, their faces in the high-key lighting suited to Bergman's Death figure. Second, we see a sleazy pool hall where the other gang gathers its members.

As we hear Jackson's voice, we've witnessed the somewhat suspenseful line that creates the entire video's narrative and purpose. The camera focuses on each gang leader at a slightly low angle. The crosscutting continues, alternating between one gang piling on a truck, presumably to the rumble's location, and the other gang, walking. Of course, the suspense of "who'll get there first," and "what'll happen when they get there" is heightened even in the first few *seconds* of this video by a question: Where's Michael Jackson, and what role will he play in all of this?

Even before Jackson's entrance — to the line "the fire's in their eyes, and their words are really clear! So beat it, just beat it" — we've witnessed WEST SIDE STORY revisited. One gang even lines up its members facing the camera for our inspection; then, each member of the group turns, yelling his call to action. But Jackson's role? After the series of shots that unfolds the narrative, intercut with the fearful, guarded reactions of bystanders, we come upon Jackson in still a third location — the bedroom of his apartment, lying on his bed. Somehow, Jackson instinctively, prophetically knows there will be trouble. As if to foreshadow the ways in which his powers to reconcile the fighters will have their effect, he wears a white t-shirt decorated with a piano keyboard and music notation as he literally dances from his room to find the warring factions. But our original suspense continues: while we may wonder how Jackson 'knew' there was reason to leave his room, we still

wonder what his part will be in the potential violence.

A strikingly lit longshot frames Jackson as he leaves his apartment through a dark hall, highlighting his *feet* — the mechanism for reconciliation — and his newly-chic white socks. The video continues crosscutting between the gangs, one marching from right to left, the other from left to right, as Jackson searches in vain through the poolhall which one of the gangs abandoned earlier. This serves, however, to highlight Jackson's considerable dancing abilities as he lip-syncs the lyrics with the conviction of a pacifist preacher:

"Show them how funky,
strong is your fight ...
It doesn't matter
who's wrong or right,
so beat it ...
beat it, beat it, beat it."

Meanwhile, the rivals line up (shot at extreme low angles) for battle; each gang leader is reaffirmed for the viewer through a medium close up at low angle. But their power doesn't last very long. Jackson has somehow arrived as the two leaders begin their choreographed knife-threat, and the visual power shift begins. As the two men dance around one another, threatening one another with knives, we suddenly see them at high angle, almost from a bird's eye point of view. Jackson, on the other hand, is shot at the lowest angle yet, his dominance and supremacy established as he physically separates the two men. And he makes them toe the line — the chorus line, resolving the conflict through his song and a tough, gymnastic dance that eventually brings the entire garageful of gang members into Broadway unison. And the fight is averted.

Michael Jackson's "Beat It," therefore, reestablishes many of the principles of the U.S. musical film that Jackson's audience would most likely reject in the film genre's classic AMERICAN IN PARIS or WEST SIDE STORY form. Jackson's image is carefully cultivated. Magically, he has "seen," somehow, that the fight will take place, and his are the only powers that can prevent hurt and destruction. Of course, song and dance "work" as the way to avoid conflict, opening this video to the same criticism which its classic forebears met, that of realism's deception and pretense when it is conveyed through what is, in effect, fantasy.

As entertainment, "Beat It" is fascinating, beautifully edited, lit, composed, and choreographed. And unlike the elegant, cool Fred Astaire or the athletic Gene Kelly, our "hero," Michael Jackson, seems unlikely. Although in his early twenties, Jackson seems a thin, wiry "childman," perhaps broadening our restricted images of a star to a more "everyperson" status.

Yet Jackson's fantasy persona becomes reinforced through another successful video, this time to accompany "Billie Jean." The setting is a surrealistic street. Every time Jackson's pursuer — a detective following

him — tries to take a photograph, Jackson's image never shows up on the final print. Every time Jackson walks down the street, a square block of concrete lights up (magically) under his feet. And at the denouement of the video, Jackson disappears entirely, magically, as his pursuer is captured by the police. Freeze frames of Jackson in dancing poses throughout the video seem to make him a human artwork — a beautiful, magical, powerful star, invincible in his abilities to resolve human conflict or escape his oppressors.

Michael Jackson's videos are exemplary in their use of (homage to?) tried-and-true aspects of the U.S. musical (particularly WEST SIDE STORY) and as models of editing techniques to create suspense: crosscutting, movement, lighting, and, simply, the refusal to answer "what will happen next?" until the very end. But as our "new" videos rely on older models, we might note the ways in which stars like Jackson carefully design their images. It brings up that age-old musical question, "Can song and dance *really* do *all that*?" Since Jackson is indeed the fantasy mediator, the video unintentionally reaffirms the *negative* politics of promoting fantasy solutions to social conflicts. But the video allows another political view to emerge. Through Jackson's direct involvement at the end of the action, he blurs class, financial, and social distinctions in a gesture of unity. His involvement contrasts to the Donna Summer video, where the star seems strangely detached from the subject matter her narrative seems to support.

"SHE WORKS HARD FOR THE MONEY,
SO YOU'D BETTER TREAT HER RIGHT."

Donna Summer's hit, "She Works Hard for the Money," would appear to be a song championing working class women's rights and sentiments as they find little financial or spiritual satisfaction in their work or personal lives:

"She works hard for the money ...
So hard for it, honey ...
She works hard for the money,
so you better treat her right.

The lyrics of the hard-driving, rhythmic song find their ostensible parallel in the video. The pulsing introduction accompanies the visual image of a dancer in slow-motion, spinning in a flowing gown. As the regular rhythm of the song begins, the visual track cuts quickly to a woman in her thirties waking up to an alarm, telling us that the slow-motion images belonged to the woman and were part of a dream. This woman is NOT Donna Summer, but a woman who will be the video's Everywoman. She is seen as a waitress, a seamstress in a sweatshop, a scrubwoman in an office building, and at home with her children. The narrative allows us to presume that she is also a single mother with two rather uncooperative, unruly, unappreciative offspring. We see the featured woman in a variety of sexist and physically grueling scenarios: men's patting her behind as she waitresses, her bowing and raising her head in unison with other seamstresses bent over their sewing

machines, her being besieged by dirty cups and saucers; men's chewing food, some of which is half-outside their mouths; and her being stiffed with measly tips or none at all.

Yet the narrative reveals a certain nobility, through the woman's communion with fellow workers as she goes in to clean offices before the rest of the world is awake. After a dissolve and pan from the woman's bed to a New York street, the first part of the video seems to break down structurally into three parts. These are integrated through crosscutting, with the same woman as their focus: first, our heroine is washing a floor; next, waitressing; finally, working as a seamstress. The second part shows us her home life. A shot of her walking towards the camera carrying two bags of groceries emphasizes the difficulty of her existence. Wearing high heels, she stumbles over the dirt and rocks near train tracks; a telescopic lens makes her every movement seem fruitless or at best difficult. The third part quickens the editing pace, intercutting shots of the roughness of her work in each place and at home.

Where, you might ask, is Donna Summer in all of this? Donna Summer appears in the video, but as the lofty narrator. Hers are all glamour close ups as she lip-syncs her song. Even though she occasionally appears within the same frame with and often rushes to the aid of our real heroine, she is in no way a participant in the action. In effect, the film's blatantly political message is undercut by Summer's rather *prima donna* stance. Doesn't Summer work hard for her money? It's difficult to tell. While the song sounds as if she sang her heart out during the recording session, Summer barely opens her mouth to sync the lyrics. In fact, her gestures, what few there are, seem so laconic that they visually deny the truths of the song and the rest of the video. We see Summer draped over a time clock in the factory where our heroine works as a seamstress, as a client fingering a cup of coffee in the cafe where our heroine works as a waitress. All the time Summer convinces us that she is a star in that word's most traditional and distasteful sense — the woman of leisure who can feel politically justified by the video's theme, but who distances herself from other women's plight. All Summer's video does is to reaffirm unfortunate class distinctions. While the intentional content of the video is admirable, Summer's inaction and rather blatant glamour "stance" undercuts whatever political strengths the film might have communicated.

The final sequence underscores this distancing's unfortunate effects. Dancers in various uniforms representing a variety of professions perform in unison on a New York street — our heroine having joined them — we learn she'd been a dancer before her present existence. Physically and spiritually Summer stands *above* them in the mise-en-scene. She is photographed at low angle, and is posed on a fire escape *above* the dancers in the street. How could we possibly believe, then, the allegedly political message of Summer's song and video when the star remains more than a star, detached from the action, separated from the working class people in her mise-en-scene, reaffirming class and social distinctions that undercut the entire narrative? In effect, Summer has

separated herself not only from the issues she purports to expose but from other women as well. This allegedly political video, then, has a distressing, unintentional political message.

"PUT ON YOUR RED SHOES AND DANCE THE BLUES..."

The video to David Bowie's "Let's Dance" merges several interesting structures and categories. While not as obliged to the traditional musical as Jackson and Summer's videos, Bowie's tries to make a political statement about the permeation of capitalism, particularly as it both seduces and then rejects those outside the mainstream of society, people for whom there may never be a place, with or without the American Express card featured in the narrative. Unlike Jackson and Summer's videos, "Let's Dance" does not create its visuals from the lyrics of the song. If anything, the visuals completely contradict the deceptively simplistic words:

"Let's Dance.
Put on your red shoes and dance the blues.
Let's Dance.
To the sound that's playing on the radio.
Let's sway.
While color lights up your face ..."

The setting is Australia, presumably outside of Sidney. Bowie, the performer/narrator of this apparently political video, performs in a bar filled mostly with Aborigines, people who haven't had a share in Australian culture or its financial spoils. The red shoes prove to be the video's central symbol of capitalism and white culture. As a young Aborigine man and woman dance in the bar, we crosscut to the same couple with friends or family. They find the red shoes in the dirt on a mountaintop overlooking the city. She puts them on, and they begin to dance, accepting the material seduction of capitalism and the promise of a "better life if one works hard."

Then come images that reinforce exactly what the red shoes mean to the narrative. The young man is suddenly a factory worker, as Bowie, in the guise of the manager, walks in with a woman associate who's wearing the red shoes. Bowie evidently speaks harshly to the young man (as well as his gesture and facial expression can indicate and dominate the lyrics of the song). The woman's red shoes visually represent capitalism and its oppression of the young man's people. We next crosscut to the young woman, scrubbing the front porch of a wealthy white woman, who walks by the young woman wearing — what else — the red shoes, as the Aborigine woman looks after her longingly. Alternating surreal images of the young man's pulling heavy machinery through Sidney traffic, and the young woman's trying to scrub clean the city's streets, Bowie undercuts his own stardom, his own capitalism, his own success. These images tell us not only of the Aborigines' oppression at the hands of people like Bowie, but also that their desire to give in to the seduction of capitalism and the promise of a more comfortable existence won't work.

Bowie illustrates this with yet another example. The young man and woman are now in a shopping center in Sidney where they purchase things — a necklace, a fancy dinner — with an American Express card, probably the most visible worldwide symbol of the dominant culture. After they've had this fling, however, we have reason to both applaud the Aborigines and hate ourselves for oppressing them. The young woman takes off the red shoes and stomps them in the dirt, a decision to reject the dominant culture and to preserve her own. Unfortunately, however, this rejection keeps the Aborigines at the fringes of a world they deserve to share. A final series of shots places them high atop a mountain overlooking the city, distant from the life they can't have. The final shot is three-part in nature with Bowie at the center, the Aborigine couple at the left, and visions of elegant Sidney on the right. The rock star visually and narratively becomes the "bridge" between the dominant and oppressed cultures, partly with the capitalists, partly with the oppressed. He reveals the multilayered complexities of keeping one's culture while participating with another, and the essential problem of the Aborigines' being able to participate at all in a white-dominated world.

Bowie deserves credit for participating in the oppressive side of the video's action. A performer known for taking risks, he doesn't pretend that "Let's Dance" can represent a panacea for all the world — say, in the way that the dances in "Beat It" pretend to resolve all social conflict. David Bowie's "Let's Dance" video, then, reconciles the two extremes we've seen in Jackson and Summer. While he acts as the instrument through which the "problem" is presented, he doesn't pretend that he alone can or will solve the problem. He is both the musician in the Aborigine bar and the capitalist industrialist who, however indirectly, helps to oppress people. While the final image might appear to "detach" Bowie in the way that Summer's detachment throughout her video undercuts her pretense of participation, Bowie has kept the narrative's structure and purpose valid through his own appearance in a variety of roles. For David Bowie, there are no simple solutions; we can't solve the problem of the world in a six-minute video. But Bowie's one of the only performers who appears to be willing to acknowledge this where others won't.[\(6\)](#)

All three of these videos — "Beat It," "She Works Hard for the Money," and "Let's Dance" — are well-produced and visually interesting. Structurally, they form an interesting triad: Jackson, the seer/prophet, resolving the world's conflicts through dance; Summer, the glamorous narrator, who apparently undercuts her own plea for social equity by her detachment and contrast to her subject; Bowie, the political narrator/participant, who relies less on the traditional musical and follows through on his ostensibly political tale by undercutting his *own* pretenses and the simplistic notion that "Let's Dance" will solve the world's problems. Bowie not only seems to bridge the need to reconcile issues of dominant versus oppressed cultures, but also dares to raise the issues credibly in the first place.

Rock videos are crucial promotional tools for the music industry, and their varieties in structure and purpose could easily be the subject of several analyses. Through my own readings, I don't pretend to have covered the entire range of formats, content, and visual styles. However, as more and more music videos borrow their formats from Hollywood films, as more and more pretend to be "mere entertainment" while featuring the personality, appearance, and sexuality of one performer, observers of this "new" form of entertainment are rewarded with new political frontiers on which to practice their skills as careful viewers.

Notes

[1.](#) Cohn Hay was featured in a "Private Reel" segment on the NBC weekly series, *Friday Night Videos*, August 26, 1983. This quote was excerpted from that interview.

[2.](#) There is a serious theoretical problem in rock videos: one might view the structure of these brief "films" as a dream structure, given the often sadomasochistic and surrealistic overtones which many feature. For the purposes of this article, however, I've selected videos from commercially-available sources — that is, network television programming, more readily accessible to more people. These videos are selected by networks for their "broad" appeal. While sexuality is by no means a criterion for not selecting a video for national television, sadomasochism and the videos which feature them (many by the Rolling Stones, for example) lie within the provinces of cable/pay sources. I address in this article, therefore, those types of videos which more people are likely to see and those which provide a framework for an introductory discussion. Moreover, various articles have pointed to the racism of cable-TV companies' programming that tends to feature mostly white groups or performers. It appears that commercial television is more "careful" in its selections. The four or so weeks I studied the NBC show brought a variety of black performers to my attention (Sunnier, Jackson, Prince, Eddy Grant, etc.). I note this to acknowledge accusations of MTV's racism, and to acknowledge its serious implications.

[3.](#) Examples of these inc videos by the Eurythmics, a group known for their song, "Sweet Dreams Are Made of These," Rather feature the fine song to advantage, the video utilizes rather cheap surrealist techniques — a bull circling an office table as the two featured members of the group lie head-to-head on the oval table; numerous close-ups of eyeballs; and members of the band sitting cross-legged, eyes closed, in "mystical" trances.

[4.](#) A particularly distasteful video is, unfortunately, one of the most popular. "Hungry Like the Wolf" by Duran Duran features the lead singer on a hunt in "darkest Africa" (in its most stereotyped sense), where black women are painted to resemble and act like savages. Stevie Nicks, late of Fleetwood Mac, cultivates a 17th century, mystical persona. Her videos remind one of the scene in SINGING IN THE RAIN

where Gene Kelly shows Debbie Reynolds exactly how fake the machinery of Hollywood can be. Nicks dresses herself in flowing, medieval-appearing gowns with extensive, concentrated use of wind machines to give her that "innocent-yet-witchy" look.

[5.](#) It is also important to note that the videos' pace and editing are strikingly like that of TV commercials. And the purpose is also the same: the selling of both product and image, in this case, the "star."

[6.](#) My research has turned up few analytic articles on music video. One interesting article on "The New British Invasion," written by Patrick Goldstein, appeared in *American Film*, 8, No. 7 (May 1983), 17-19. Goldstein discusses the fact that today's best rock videos are directed by people from England. It's difficult, however, to give credit where credit is due. In viewing the music videos I used for this particular analysis, I was unable to locate any record of the films' technicians, directors or writers. Perhaps it is believed that to offer film credits would break the "magic" of music video. In any event, we regretfully cannot know the people to credit or critique.

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Flashdance

The dead end kid

by Kathryn Kalinak

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Cinema bears a unique relation to fantasy. Films offer scenarios as if they were dramas, testing out ready-made fantasies, ostensibly for our approval or disapproval. But because of films' relation to the dream state, they have a unique power over us. If films are, arguably, the fantasies of the unconscious, they are, as well, the stuff of which dreams are made.

It is this relation that film bears to fantasy that make the recent FLASHDANCE (Adrian Lyne, 1983) such a provocative film, and ultimately a disturbing one, particularly from a feminist perspective. On one level FLASHDANCE presents an exhilarating fantasy of control — of women's control over their own bodies. The flashdancers, though objects of desire, are captured in moments of blissful oblivion of the masculine gaze's perusal and power. On another level, a deeper level, however, the film frustrates its female viewers. Like so many other recent Hollywood films of the 70s and 80s, FLASHDANCE constructs its most seductive fantasy around the unattainable, effectively restricting the power of female psychic energy.[\(1\)](#)

FLASHDANCE is one of a crop of super hits to arrive in theaters in time for the summer of 1983. It borrows heavily from John Badham's SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER (with an obvious role reversal) and Dorothy Arzner's DANCE, GIRL, DANCE. FLASHDANCE chronicles the trials and tribulations of an 18 year-old welder in a Pittsburgh steel mill as she dances her way from the stage at a local working class bar to the Pittsburgh Ballet. An updating of the Warner's backstage musicals of the 30s, FLASHDANCE acknowledges the exigencies of economic necessity while retaining the genre's essentially democratic message. In 1983 the show is removed from the expensive lights of a Broadway theater (where orchestra seats now cost \$50) to the modest stage in Mawby's, a drinking hangout for steel workers. An economic depression seems to foster most strongly the ideology of upward social mobility. Like the heroines of Warner's musicals Alexandra Owens (Jennifer Beals), uses

dancing as the way up and out of her social context.

Flashdancing is a demanding form of solo dance for which the women in the film train rigorously, conscientiously, and persistently. Here are women in superb physical shape. Training like athletes (and performing like them), the flashdancers nightly execute routines that would qualify them for the 1984 Olympics. The flashdancers clearly demonstrate the ecstasy of their performance, which is exhilarating both for the audience seated at Mawby's and the audience in the movie theater. But interestingly enough for the women who perform it, flashdancing constitutes a kind of non-performance. Ignoring the audience, they dance for each other and for themselves. Alex(andra) is embarrassed when her boyfriend, Nick, catches her dancing in an unguarded moment, but the ogling at Mawby's leaves her unfazed:

"I never see them. You go out there and the music starts and you begin to feel it and your body just starts to move. Something inside you just clicks. You take off and you're gone. It's like you're somebody else for a second. I just can't wait to get out there so I can disappear."

Echoing the lyrics of the film's title song, "Flashdance: What a Feeling," Alex celebrates the physical liberation of the dance:

"When I hear the music
Close my eyes, hear the music
Wrap around, take ahold of my heart
What a feeling."

Flashdancing does initially appear to be a kind of non-dancing, an abandonment to self-expression. It would be hard to argue that potential viewers for a film expressly about dance believe that the actresses improvise the dance numbers as they go along. But initially it does seem as if the dancers are almost out of control, moving impulsively, disregarding established choreography, and dancing in complete abandon to the music. The speed of the dance (and our ignorance of the basic movements of the dance form) reinforces the impression of spontaneity. In fact, one of the film's many turn-ons is the illusion of the wildly uncontrollable. The result is a subliminal tension generated between the appearance of sexual abandon and audience knowledge of what constitutes an 'R' rating.

The audience within the film experiences the same confusion. Mawby's mostly male patrons see flashdancing as a more titillating version of the bump-and-grind they can get at the strip joint across the street, the Zanzibar. They eagerly await the moment when the dancers go beyond the point of sexual decorum (which, since FLASHDANCE is an "R," they never do). But this possibility rivets their attention, and the reaction shots at Mawby's are strikingly similar to the close ups of the leering customers at the Zanzibar. In a way the failure of the audience at Mawby's to appreciate the flashdance's sophisticated choreography releases the women who perform it from the approval and/or

approbation of their customers. Ultimately, flashdancing is not only solo performance; it is self-performance.

It is interesting and perhaps more than coincidental that Alex wears a walkman in a number of scenes, specifically those in which she is riding her bicycle. In particular, in one scene her walkman momentarily protects her from a pass by her boss. Portable and affordable playback devices for both cassette and radio listening are fast becoming a symbol if not symptom of urban life. The walkman allows its owner to tune out unpleasantness, substituting music (or other organized sound) for disruptive noise, providing an escape into a world of one's own making, a seamless movie soundtrack for the images of real life. Alex relies upon her walkman when she is most at the mercy of her environment, when she is riding her bicycle for instance, or when she is vulnerable to intrusions by men (during her lunch break at the factory, for example). The walkman's infusion of music is a substitute for and continuation of the state of mind she achieves while dancing. Both musically induced states suggest the rejection of the world, and a retreat from the environment it thrusts upon her.

WOMEN'S BODIES

The cinematic representation of women's bodies in FLASHDANCE is an issue that is likely to engender heated controversy. In many ways FLASHDANCE bears a striking resemblance to another recent film about athletic performance, PERSONAL BEST. Whether or not the "purposeful" display of women's bodies constitutes something fundamentally different from, or even coexistent with, sexual objectification for male pleasure is a question that will undoubtedly be raised in conjunction with FLASHDANCE as it was with PERSONAL BEST. Linda Williams, writing in JUMP CUT on PERSONAL BEST, argues that the fragmentation of the female body as a method of expression (as opposed to exploitation) is no longer possible

"in the context of our already fallen, patriarchal, world, [where] Eve's body is no longer innocent, no longer her own."

Williams concludes with the inevitable question:

"What would a non-patriarchal representation of the athletic female body be?" [\(2\)](#)

The depiction of women's bodies in FLASHDANCE offers no easy resolution to this question. But it does offer an insight into the ways in which generic expectations structure the representation of the female body. FLASHDANCE is, one must remember, a musical (albeit a modern one). As such, it falls heir to a tradition of a certain kind of cinematic representation for its female stars. A talent for singing and dancing earned a woman a prominent position within the frame. Nonetheless, in spite of, or perhaps because of the charisma they generated, women relinquished the authority of their talent to the

camera. Tap dancing, high kicks, spins, and leaps, were executed by legs, hips, and arms in close up, performed as if autonomously. Bodies in their entirety were integrated only briefly to establish perspective.

But many musical stars, particularly dancers, achieved a kind of power through their very objectification because of the control they exerted in movement into, out of, and through the frame. Recall Cyd Charisse's initial appearance as the dragon lady in the dream sequence of *SINGIN' IN THE RAIN*. The camera slowly pans her long leg in close up. But as the camera moves, so does Charisse, her leg moving through the space of the frame, disturbing, if not actually disrupting, the static iconography of the *mise-en-scene*.

On the other hand, Busby Berkeley built a musical empire based on the frighteningly near-perfect objectification of women by restricting their movement. Their faces are severed from their bodies, their individuality reduced to the conformity of body parts. Berkeley fragmented, abstracted, and fetishized his chorines. They moved into and out of the frame, not by their own volition, but by the huge moving turntables which propelled them. When the camera was positioned overhead (and it frequently was), it denied even that movement to them. Robbed of their very humanity, they became part of an ever-changing geometric design.

The dehumanization in Busby Berkeley's musicals was certainly not restricted to women. But we remember the female chorine from a Berkeley film, because of Berkeley's fascination with women. He masked men in top hats and white tails or in similar constrictive uniforms. Women exemplified their own sexuality through Berkeley's obsessive concentration on costume, lighting, editing, and camera positioning on the sexually charged parts of their bodies.

Musicals, as a genre, hardly have offered an unproblematic system of representation for women. But musicals do contain the possibility of resistance through the generic importance of physical movement. Movement allowed women a certain degree of freedom from the constraints of the camera, challenging the iconographic grid which locked their images into rigidly defined patterns of representation.

Women, as they have been represented traditionally in cinema, have been at the mercy of those who have the power to place the female within a certain cinematic context through control of cinematic apparatus. In musicals, however, generic expectations have an impact on that control. The constrictive system of representation can be loosened momentarily to show the physical movement involved in the dance.

This is what happens in *FLASHDANCE*: the camera consistently captures the dancers as they move. Because the shots are relatively long in duration at the beginning of the numbers, the dancers are able to define the space they occupy, delineating the space initially controlled by the camera. Opening their numbers center stage, the dancers move

from one side of the stage to the other, and up and down the runway in front of them. The camera watches the paths of the dancers in long shots, or follows them in tracking shots, fragmenting their bodies in close up only after the dancers have first defined the physical dimensions of their performance.

It would be difficult to ignore the pornographic aspects of the photography as well as the sadomasochism implicit in the films choice of subject matter (the leather and chains dance sequence, the attack on Alex by the television set) and camera positioning. But in spite of this, the film exhilarates its female spectators.

The subject of pornography and its ramifications for the female spectator is a complex, important area of study that deserves far greater attention than this paper is able to afford it. Central to the issue is the relation between spectatorship and identification. But another important concern in the study of pornography, and one which FLASHDANCE illustrates to a large degree, is the effect of movement. The visual pleasure attached to the spectatorship of the erotic object in a static configuration is disrupted, if only momentarily, by the movement of that object. This is certainly not to deny the implicit pornography of FLASHDANCE. It is to suggest that stasis (the visual basis of pornography) and movement exist on opposite ends of a visual continuum and, in this film, gently tug at one another. (This may be one reason why the pornography in FLASHDANCE is not as offensive as it might be.)

There are a number of other "hooks" for the female spectator in the film besides the sexual hook of pornography. Women performed a majority of the songs used in the film, and studio and record company executives who promoted the soundtrack album on the basis of its appeal to women did not overlook that fact. The costuming promoted a rejection of high fashion ideals based on wealth, and substituted a radical chic based on personal style (advocated, however, with the vehemence of Women's Wear Daily). And the film explores the positive aspects of relations between women through the importance the narrative placed on the camaraderie of the flashdancers.

If there is one thing that characterizes the dancers in FLASHDANCE it is their movement. The "exotic" dancers (strippers) across the street at the Zanzibar offer their bodies in erotic poses or mobile displays (Alex's best friend, Jeannie, sits as if transfixed on the stage, moving her legs in slow circles for the clientele directly in front of her). But the flashdancers at Mawby's propel their bodies through the frame, taking ownership of the space at their disposal. In the Zanzibar, the mise-en-scène includes both the dancers and their audience. In the opening shot, a stripper walks down the runway amid catcalls and leering glances, her space limited by the presence and gaze of the audience. In Mawby's the camera rarely shows the audience in the same shot as the dancer. There are cuts from one to the other instead, as if the dancers left no space in the frame for the audience to occupy.

The flashdancers not only control their bodies physically, but they also exert a force over the cinematic space which affects their representation. There are two workout sequences in the film. In the first, Alex goes through a routine at a ballet bar in her apartment. Although close ups of her body constitute a large portion of the sequence, Alex continually moves in those close ups, whether it is stretching into and out of the frame, or whether it is the simple running in place which accompanies the shots of her legs.

One of the most electrifying sequences in FLASHDANCE is the weight room session where the flashdancers work out. With the help of weight machines they pull themselves up into a previously empty frame, then disappear beneath it. Legs, arms, and torsos charge into the frame from all directions while the camera is poised in motionless readiness for its subject to reappear.

The music which accompanies the scene, "I Love Rock 'n Roll," literalizes the obsession of the film and the characters in it with rock music. In FLASHDANCE rock music becomes a symbol for the constant exhilaration and endless energy of the chic, young, urban lifestyle. Many of the big production numbers, particularly "Flashdance," "Maniac," and "Man Hunt," build around dramatic shifts in musical structure (dynamic level, tempo, instrumentation) and driving rhythms with heavy percussion. Part of the reason for the ecstasy of the flashdance may well be the exhilaration/exhaustion of being pushed to the physical limit by the music. Certainly a number like "Maniac" (Alex's workout music) demands a total surrender to its driving rhythms. (Alex is exhausted by the time the song is over.) If the walkman provides Alex with access to her own private space, then rock music creates that personal space by encapsulating her manic drive.

FANTASY

There is, of course, more than one fantasy at work in FLASHDANCE. The exhilarating fantasy of control rests within a larger framework, the rags-to riches story of one of the flashdancers, Alex Owens. The Paramount press release describes the film in just these terms:

"a young woman ... struggles to gain independence and realizes her dream of becoming a professional dancer."[\(3\)](#)

It's a seductive fantasy. The control that Alex has over her body is projected onto the control she seemingly has over her life. It's also an insidious fantasy. FLASHDANCE goes to great lengths to establish its credibility, employing several traditional conventions of filmic realism to do so: location shooting, the use of unknown actors and actresses, anti-literary dialogue, the use of working class life as subject matter, and an emphasis on backstage life. Within this artificially heightened construction of reality, the film offers a fantasy, one that initially appears to conform to the realistic ethic which permeates the film. This fantasy projects the illusion of attainability and offers itself up as a possible dream. But the film is either unwilling or unable to sustain the

female quest. Going from Mawby's bar to the bar at the Pittsburgh Ballet does not have to be an unachievable goal. But in *FLASHDANCE*, a film that flaunts its realism like a badge, the protagonist's quest, and our fantasy in sharing it with her, turn out to be absurd economically, socially, artistically, and physically.

Here is the dream: a young woman, a talented dancer, works during the day at a strenuous and draining job. Its only compensation is the financial reward, large enough to enable her to create her own destiny through training in classical dance. Her boss falls in love with her, introducing her to a style of life she longs for and which she can acquire through her unique talent. In the end, she passes her audition for a ballet company and leaps into the arms of her boyfriend in her newly acquired status as ballerina. The story has the power of a dream, but enough "resistance" towards the fantasy remains in the film to undermine that power.

Consider Alex's job. How could an 18 year-old woman land a skilled labor job as a welder in the unionized steel industry of an economically depressed union town? How could anyone? If an audience were somehow blissfully unaware of the realities of economic existence in post-Reagan United States, then the film's context would provide this information for them. Not only are any other women missing in the factory, so are employees, male or female, under 30. (The steel mill scenes were shot on location in Pittsburgh. One wonders whether director Lyne's camera revealed a deeper economic truth than he had intended.)

Particularly disturbing is the lunch scene played out against the background of an overweight black woman who runs the lunch wagon. In a gross caricature of black stereotypes, she executes a wide-eyed double take as punctuation for the lovers' quarrel between Alex and Nick. (There is a black flashdancer, by the way, but she never gets to dance on screen.) It's a telling scene. Even while we are being offered a model of female economic liberation, we note the traditional entrapment of women (particularly minority women) in the ghetto of unskilled labor employment.

Hollywood films frequently ask us to believe in outrageous social pairings, heiresses with newspaper reporters, and shop girls with millionaire playboys. *FLASHDANCE* is no exception. Nick pursues and captures Alex. He owns the steel mill yet falls instantly for her charms. They have only their working class origins in common (besides sex). *FLASHDANCE* is not the only film to rely upon romantic implausibility. But it does so an insidious way, undermining Alex's finale at the end of the film. Nick calls a few friends at the Pittsburgh Ballet and gets Alex an audition. When she is understandably upset, the film wants us to side with Nick. In an explosive tantrum, Alex leaps from a moving Porsche in the middle of a tunnel to shriek at the top of her lungs and generally humiliate herself. Her need to achieve her own status in a world which has previously denied it to her would seem a reasonable if not necessary

part of her struggle. But in FLASHDANCE her independence seems over-dramatized, exaggerated to the point of ridicule.

Artistically, Alex's fantasy is highly problematic. At age 18 she is probably too old to begin serious ballet training, a point made by *Ballet Magazine*.⁽⁴⁾ But she believes that she will one day be a solo performer. The film reinforces Alex's naiveté about artistic performance. Her best friend, Jeannie (Sunny Johnson), has a parallel dream: to skate professionally. When Jeannie blows her audition, a demoralized Alex tells Nick, "She practiced for two years." Is that how long she thinks it will take her to become a ballerina? Even STAYING ALIVE, the new John Travolta vehicle, admits that the road to success is rocky. The film opens six years after Tony Manero (Travolta) has come to Manhattan. He teaches dance classes and waits tables while living in a scummy men's hotel, endlessly hoping for that one big break.

Ultimately, however, the most destructive part of the fantasy in FLASHDANCE is the physical impossibility upon which it is based. Almost concurrently with the film's nationwide release came the information that Jennifer Beals did not do her own dancing. *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *People*, and the syndicated television entertainment news show ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT (among others) reported the disclosure of Marine Jahan as Beals' dance double. Beals herself candidly admitted that Jahan helped her with the dancing, but when she saw the film, she admitted that Jahan did all the dancing:

"Marine did ALL the dancing in the sequences they finally used on the screen ... I mean they used my face for close-ups, and a few other times, but when I watched closely I could easily tell the difference between the two of us."⁽⁵⁾

So could others. Even before the disclosure surfaced, viewers and reviewers of the film suspected that the woman who played Alex and the woman who performed the dance sequences were not one and the same. (There was even a third dancer, as yet uncredited, who performed the more gymnastic feats for Jahan.) The most telling signal was body shape. Beals is slightly built. In the dance sequences Jahan is muscular, with wide shoulders. The camera's insistence on fragmented body parts and the consistent use of long shots and intercut close ups confirmed what many viewers perceived viscerally.

Films always demand their audiences' willing suspension of belief in order to preserve the illusion of reality they offer. Early audiences had to learn the structural as well as dramatic and generic conventions of film watching. In a country mesmerized by its own film industry, even the practical concerns of filmmaking became noteworthy. The use of the stunt double to perform in place of the star became part of a shared filmic heritage.

But in recent years, this has begun to change. In the cinema's quest for authenticity, its stars have put themselves through grueling, even

torturous, regimes in order to fulfill as many of the film's physical requirements as possible. John Travolta did all his own dancing in both SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER and STAYING ALIVE; Christopher Reeve built up his body for SUPERMAN; Meryl Streep learned Polish for SOPHIE'S CHOICE; and Sylvester Stallone even went into the ring as Rocky.

In the wake of this movement towards authenticity comes the highly publicized use of a dance double in FLASHDANCE.⁽⁶⁾ The film bases Alex's success story upon a physical impossibility, a fact not lost upon adolescent audiences. Jennifer Beals could not execute the strenuous athletic performance attributed to her character. The public disclosure of this information not only distracts an audience, but it also cheats them out of a fantasy. The leaked news of Jahan's performance did more than destroy the "magic"⁽⁷⁾ of the film. The secretive pairing of actress and dancer unconsciously transmitted the message that beauty and brawn don't mix.

CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD MUSICALS

It is interesting to compare FLASHDANCE to one of its progenitors, SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER, in its manipulation of fantasy. SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER is a film about a Brooklyn teenager, played by John Travolta, who uses a talent for disco dancing to propel himself out of a dead-end life. FLASHDANCE changes the gender of the protagonist, and in doing so, it reveals a striking difference between the creation and fruition of fantasies for males and females in Hollywood films.

Like Alex Owens, Tony Manero (John Travolta) comes from a working class background. Both have found dance as an escape from the stifling effects of their environment. But they part company on the fantasies they live out for their audiences: Alex's fantasy is unattainable; Tony's is within his grasp.

FLASHDANCE expends all its psychic energy on the fantasies that do not count very much. Alex has a job as a welder in a steel mill. A highly skilled worker, Alex presumably earns enough to finance a massive apartment/ballet studio in a converted warehouse, and saves enough money to put herself through ballet school. Tony works in a hardware store. Alex lives completely on her own, free from parental intervention. Tony lives with his family, sacrificing privacy and personal integrity because of ethnic expectations (single children do not move out) and financial considerations (the head of the family is unemployed and it is unlikely that Tony's wages would permit a monthly apartment rent anyway). Alex is accepted into the Pittsburgh Ballet School, her success seemingly assured. Tony is left at end of the SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER poised on the brink of his future, willing to take a chance on changing his life, but unequipped with any specifics on how to do it.

If SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER seems a more restrictive fantasy, it is. But, in fact, because of the limitations placed on it by economic and social reality, it presents a fantasy within the realm of possibility,

offering a positive role model for its male viewers. What does Tony accomplish? He wins a (rigged) dance contest and decides he can use his talent to better his life. It is not much, but it offers more to its male viewers than the blind alley down which FLASHDANCE leads its female viewers.

Even the more flamboyant STAYING ALIVE preserves the grittiness of Tony's struggle. STAYING ALIVE picks up his story six years later. Still trying to make it into a Broadway chorus, Tony goes on an endless route of auditions while, ironically, teaching other dancers how to get into a show. Supplementing his income with demoralizing work as a waiter in a bar, he cannot even afford his own apartment. He lives in a room in a men's hotel, waiting in the lobby for the one phone to ring. When it does, it affords him the opportunity for stardom, but not until he goes through an exhaustive round of rehearsals, backstage politics, and emotional trauma.

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER and STAYING ALIVE inculcate a respect for male artistic aspiration and elevate populist art forms such as disco dancing. FLASHDANCE creates a distinction between so-called high art and low art, ironically slighting the populist dance form the protagonist has mastered in favor of the more acceptable, middle class dance form, ballet, at which she is a klutz. (The one time in the film she attempts a ballet move, she spills a diet soda all over herself.)

And finally, John Travolta does his own dancing, embodying the very fantasy he enacts.

Although FLASHDANCE borrows from both FAME and ROCKY, as well as SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER, the film bears its closest spiritual kinship to Dorothy Arzner's DANCE, GIRL, DANCE (1940). Their plots are remarkably similar. Burlesque dancer Judy O'Brien (Maureen O'Hara) dreams of becoming a ballerina. Encouraged in her ambitions by an elderly dance teacher, Madame Basilova (complete with foreign accent), she pursues her goal despite her own insecurity and several setbacks (the death of her mentor, for one). Unbeknownst to Judy, the man avidly pursuing her romantically and professionally (Steve Adams, played by Ralph Bellamy) directs the very ballet company she wants to join. When she finally musters up enough courage to audition, she learns his true identity and must no longer prove her talent. The film ends with Judy's laughter.

FLASHDANCE relies upon a set of ideological assumptions similar to those promulgated in DANCE, GIRL, DANCE: the distinction between so-called low art and high art; the decadence of popular dance forms and the integrity of ballet; the necessity of moral support from an older female mentor (and her subsequent death, leaving the heroine to dance on her own two feet); and the crucial role in the protagonist's success played by the male romantic lead.

There even exists an (unwitting?) homage to DANCE, GIRL, DANCE in FLASHDANCE. In DANCE, GIRL, DANCE, Judy and Madame Basilova

pause for a moment before entering the building where Judy will audition for the ballet. The camera pans the skyscraper, holding the final extreme low angle momentarily as Madame Basilova proclaims, "This is your destiny." When Alex goes to the Pittsburgh Ballet for the first time, she, too, pauses. The camera pans up the magnificent structure which houses the ballet, ending with an extreme low angle of the imposing edifice.

Like Horatio Alger protagonists, who slave their lives away in righteous degradation only to be snatched from the jaws of poverty by a miraculous coincidence, *DANCE, GIRL, DANCE* depends upon outside intervention (in the form of a successful male) to help the female protagonist reach her dream. This *deus-ex-machina* ending foils even the heroine, who collapses into laughter when she learns how her own stubbornness and independence have actually thwarted her ambition. But Judy's hysterical laughter is an uncomfortable reminder of the psychic toll that life has expected from her. It is this legacy that the film leaves to *FLASHDANCE*: the futility of female aspiration and the rewards of acquiescence in a male world.

If you could be anything in the world you wanted to be, what would you choose? How many times have you been asked this question as children? And how often do our minds continue to formulate answers as adults? Fantasies are an important even crucial component for coming to terms with elemental fears and desires. Ultimately fantasies help to create and, in the process, make familiar, the very possibility to change within our lives, offering us the psychic power of self-determination.

FLASHDANCE is a film about many things, not the least of which is female fantasy. But, unfortunately, it promises more than it delivers. What is so frustrating about the film is the way it embeds electrifying dance sequences within a disappointing fantasy framework. All the exhilaration the film transmits to its audience leads to nothing but a dead-end.

Notes

[1.](#) I am indebted to Julia Lesage for her ideas on fantasy delivered in a lecture at Rhode Island College in May 1983: "The Politics of Fantasy in Hollywood Film." For an excellent analysis of the concept of fantasy in Hollywood film, see Julia Lesage, "The Hegemonic Female Fantasy," in *Film Reader*, No. 5 (1982), pp. 83-94.

[2.](#) Linda Williams, "Personal Best," in *JUMP CUT*, No. 27 (July 1982), p. 1.

[3.](#) Paramount Publicity Release, April 1983.

[4.](#) Review of *FLASHDANCE*, *Ballet Monthly*, July 1983.

[5.](#) Deborah Caulfield, "OK, Jennifer, Who Did the Dancing?" *Los Angeles Times* (May 22, 1983), Sec. 6, p. 1.

[6.](#) Marine Jahan, in the wake of her newly acquired celebrity status, is now appearing on a promotional tour for 9 West shoes. Billed as "the dancer who created a sensation in FLASHDANCE," she appeared recently in a Macy's advertisement on page three of the *New York Times* (October 12, 1983), Sec. 1.

[7.](#) Marine Jahan, interviewed on *Entertainment Tonight*, claimed that the producers hid her involvement on FLASHDANCE because "they didn't want to break the magic of the film."

Special thanks also to Sandy Flitterman for her encouragement and insight.

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Blade Runner A diagnostic critique

by Douglas Kellner, Flo Leibowitz, and Michael Ryan

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“The ‘therblig’ is the ultimate attempt to turn man into machine: his unique concrete capacities into optimal standard labour. It is difficult to argue for the variety of modern labour in the face of the ‘therblig.’ In its robotisation of a ten-thousandth of a minute, capitalism shows us its desire to make robots of us all — all of the time.

— Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour*

Nightmare visions of futuristic societies, or dystopias, are a major 1970s science fiction genre and stand as signs of a crisis in U.S. ideology.⁽¹⁾ Dystopias are negative utopias, negative images of future worlds. Instead of being places where people might dream of living because everything is so perfect there, dystopias represent places from which, given a chance, people would prefer to flee because everything is so imperfect. Most post-1970s Hollywood films about the future portray worlds that contain extreme environmental pollution, overpopulation, violent cities, bureaucratic administration, and economic exploitation. Conservative dystopias project fears of breakdown of law and order (ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK, THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR), the disintegration of the family, and the curtailment of individual freedom by centralized governments (THX 1138, LOGAN'S RUN, ROLLERBALL). The films frequently valorize escape to nature (e.g., THX 1138, LOGAN'S RUN) and yearn for the past. In sum, conservative dystopias present individualism, the couple, the family, and other contemporary institutions and ideologies as more “natural” and desirable than their debased future forms.

In contrast, liberal and radical dystopia films focus on the dangers of increased pollution, nuclear war, and economic exploitation. Some contain veiled allegorical critiques of advanced capitalism (e.g., ALIEN, OUTLAND, BLADE RUNNER). They therefore make a critical commentary on current forms of life and social organization with images of what intensified corporate capitalism, political repression,

and contemporary forms of dehumanization might produce in the future. However, not all dystopias can be easily categorized ideologically. Some articulate complex and often contradictory attitudes toward, and anxieties about increasing mechanization and commodification of life in advanced capitalism, reveal possible ideological conflicts in such societies. We suggest that *BLADE RUNNER* provides such a case of an ideologically ambivalent dystopia. It is open to a diagnostic critique which analyzes its forms of ideology, the film's critique of traditional and contemporary dominant ideologies, and the limitations of the film's critique. We believe that the critic's diagnostic act provides an insight into contemporary society and ideology and indicates areas for radical political intervention — points that we shall return to later.

URBAN IMAGES, FILM NOIR AND THE REVIVAL OF EXPRESSIONISM

Nightmare visions of futuristic cities predominate in a series of films which portray the socio-ecological consequences of contemporary problems such as war and pollution. In a sense, these films are thematically related to disaster films since they articulate fears about nuclear, ecological, and socio-political catastrophe. Such fears stand as symptoms of the structural anxiety most people feel as they experience the instability of an irrational marketplace society. More conservative urban dystopias project fears of the breakdown of law and order in the polis. These often evoke a yearning for stronger authorities and legal institutions to eliminate "criminal elements" and to rectify anxiety through a pacifying force (e.g., *ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK*, *THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR*). *BLADE RUNNER*, however, like Fritz Lang's *METROPOLIS*, presents a more critical dystopia in that it projects a future city which perpetuates corporate capitalism's distinguishing features — urban decay, commodification, overcrowding, highly skewed disparities of wealth and poverty, and authoritarian policing. The film's urban images present a world where advanced capitalism's worst features have coalesced to produce a polluted, overpopulated city in a society controlled by giant corporations.

The story of *BLADE RUNNER* is based on a science fiction novel by Philip K. Dick entitled *DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?* It is directed by Ridley Scott (*ALIEN*, 1979). The film version focuses more directly than the novel on the relation between capitalism and technology, and between androids (called "replicants" in the film) and human beings.⁽²⁾ In the film's society, the Tyrell corporation produces "replicants" to work and serve humans. Replicants look exactly like humans and even have memory functions. But because they progressively become more and more "human" by acquiring feelings, they are programmed to live only four years. Some have rebelled against their subjection, so a special police, Blade Runners, exists to "retire" unwilling replicants. The story concerns four such replicant rebels who have returned to earth to get their "maker," the Tyrell Corporation, to reprogram them so they can live longer. A Blade Runner, Deckard

(Harrison Ford), is called out of semi-retirement to "retire" them. Deckard falls in love with Rachel (Sean Young), one of Tyrell's most advanced replicants. Deckard manages to kill three of the rebel replicants, and fights a climactic battle with the fourth, Roy (Rutger Hauer). At the end, a police colleague allows Deckard and Rachel to escape from the city and flee into nature.

The images of a futuristic city under late, late capitalism allow *BLADE RUNNER* to be read as a social critique. The opening images of the industrial city's flaring smoke stacks and hazy pollution signify a world of total industrialization — Gary, Indiana, writ large. Industrialization has destroyed nature and forced all "fit" individuals to flee from earth to space colonies. The colored neon billboards and corporate ads dominating the skyline signify commercialization and are the dominant source of light in an otherwise obscure environment. The gaudy neon pink and red evoke a reference to Hell. In their sharp contrast to the dark streets below, the neon colors suggest the incongruity in late capitalism between the dazzling promises of consumption and the harsh realities of production and everyday life. The mixture of signs from Japanese, European, and U.S. capitalism points to a future society where trilateral capitalism has achieved its dream of a world economic system.

The cinematic play of bright, artificial images against a hazy background creates unsettling effects through which the urban scenes express social fears about urban decay and anxieties about total domination by corporations. The urban images portray a devastated environment with many houses abandoned and streets full of garbage. Crowds of people mill through rain-soaked streets, evoking common fears about overpopulation and "foreigners" overrunning future cities. On the East and West coasts of the U.S., for example, Japanese ramen and sushi cafes have replaced U.S. fast food chains, and visibly prominent are many Asian merchants and street people. The film here seems to articulate paranoia about Japanese capitalism "taking over" the United States. Nevertheless, the film's city (Los Angeles) seems under the hegemony of U.S. capitalism, which now seems to have incorporated its rivals into its structure. The society's economic structure combines small, street-merchant-style, "free enterprise" with paternalistic capitalist control. Most of the merchants in the film are Asian or European, whereas the corporate president and executives of the Tyrell Corporation are all North Americans.

Predominant in the film's setting are images of buildings which stand like fortresses towering above the masses of people milling through the streets. These towers contain corporate headquarters and look like Mayan temples. Inside, they have the trappings of palatial mansions and are often filmed in hazy golden light. The set design and narrative use of sets create an atmosphere of splendor and mystery. The high towers are accessible only by special flying vehicles, limited to the police, or by controlled access elevators. As does Fritz Lang's *METROPOLIS*, *BLADE RUNNER* contrasts an upper city containing the powerful and privileged

(the Tyrell Corporation offices, the police station) with a lower city containing the masses. *BLADE RUNNER* also features monumental buildings and stairways as interiors, eccentrically lit and photographed at distorted angles, designed to make them appear overwhelming and ominous. There are other cinematic parallels to Lang's *METROPOLIS*. For example, the tycoon Tyrell has a marked physical resemblance to *Metropolis* boss, John Frederson, and Deckard's final duel with Roy copies in some respects the confrontation between Freder, the capitalist's son turned revolutionary, and *Metropolis*' evil Dr. Rotwang, who like the Tyrell Corporation created robots to serve as laborers.

In fact, *BLADE RUNNER*'s formal style throughout is neo-expressionist with dark shadows, hazy lighting, and odd camera angles. Thematically, too, the film contains marked expressionist elements.⁽³⁾ The android chief Roy's poetic speeches seem like abbreviated versions of the ideologically ambiguous, rhapsodic monologue found in much expressionist theater. And his conversion from poet-warrior to Christ-like *savoir* recalls expressionist "transformation drama." Moreover, *BLADE RUNNER* borrows entire sequences from German expressionist films. In addition to the *METROPOLIS* parallels, the sleazy bar where Deckard finds the android Zhora is reminiscent of Mrs. Greifer's party in Pabst's film *THE JOYLESS STREET*, even down to the insect-like hats on the women. An image of Deckard, silhouetted on the stairway, parallels a similar moment in *NOSFERATU*. Overall, *BLADE RUNNER*'s emphasis on the degraded, alienating city parallels that of expressionist "street films" taken together. Thus one could read *BLADE RUNNER* as a reprise of Lang's vision of a futuristic city, featuring a final combat which conspicuously does not repeat *METROPOLIS*' appeal for class collaboration. *BLADE RUNNER* concludes by promoting the myth of transcendent romantic love in as desperate a way as another expressionist film, *DESTINY*.

Historically, expressionism has often contained a social critique, but usually an ideologically ambiguous critique, partly because of the very style. Basic to expressionism are techniques of distortion, essentializing, and exaggeration, not only of the physical environment but of character traits and behavior as well. In *BLADE RUNNER*, expressionist aesthetic techniques both articulate critiques of capitalism and embody sexist, individualist and romantic ideologies — just as they did in 1920s German expressionist art, where expressionist style and techniques were used by both the Left and Right.

Moreover, many stylistic elements of film noir make *BLADE RUNNER* even more aesthetically complex. Deckard appropriates the voice-over, first-person narrator role of the film noir detective, and Rachel acts as a classic femme noire — dark, sensual, mysterious, and seemingly morally ambivalent. Like the noire woman, Rachel wears furs, red lipstick, man-tailored suits with padded shoulders, and a 1940s Andrews Sisters hairstyle. Film noir's "corrupt society" ethos also dominates and shapes this film's overall mood of cultural pessimism.

Consequently, expressionist and film noir elements serve more than a simply formal function. Historically, both styles have conveyed malaise and disillusionment. However, expressionism generally has conveyed an active, outraged sense of justice or ethical idealism, while film noir's underlying point of view has been more amoral, cynical and resigned. *BLADE RUNNER* attempts to bring these elements together in an ideological amalgam that combines philosophical ruminations and economic critique with extremely regressive sexual politics and an individualism and romanticism historically typical of bourgeois ideology. This amalgam results in a play of conflicting ideological elements.

CAPITALISM, EXPLOITATION, AND REVOLT

BLADE RUNNER uses its highly stylized images and convoluted story to articulate fears of capitalist exploitation, technological dehumanization and the collapse of values such as love, empathy, and community. It sets into opposition the conflicts between these values and new forms of technology and social life under advanced capitalism. The technology/humanity opposition is delineated by three characters: Roy, a machine, longs to be human and fears death. Deckard, a human, increasingly sympathizes with the replicants. And Rachel, a replicant, thinks she is human and eventually enters a love relationship with a human, Deckard. Although most dystopias express fears of technology and depersonalization, *BLADE RUNNER* attempts to depict some mediation between technology and human values. Deckard says,

"Replicants are like any other machine. They can be a benefit or a hazard."

The film concludes with what seems a happy marriage of humans and replicants as Deckard and Rachel flee the city together.

The replicants stand for capitalism's oppressive features and, to a lesser degree, rebellion against exploitation. The Tyrell Corporation invents replicants to have a controllable labor force that will perform difficult and dangerous tasks. Similarly, capitalism today makes individuals into machines disciplined to fit into the labor system. The Tyrell Corporation has as a motto, "More Human Than Human." Ironically, the replicants carry out a very human rebellion, while most of the human characters seem to submit to corporate domination and a very dehumanized life. Intact, the narrative line establishes a clear similarity between Deckard's recognizing how the Tyrell Corporation exploits him and the replicants' rebellion, since both sides — killer and killed — reject their status as servants of the corporation and refuse further exploitation.

BLADE RUNNER presents a future society which blurs the line between human and machine, and it contains philosophical meditations on what it means to be human. Awareness of finitude and fear of dying are shown as distinctively human traits, along with knowledge of one's past. The replicants treasure their (faked) pictures of early life and their (programmed) memories of earlier events. They are characterized as

being especially fond of pictures of their "childhood" and "families." Thus the film presents the family as a naturalized social unit. On their own, the replicants form surrogate families, and the film ends with Rachel and Deckard's forming a family. And as the replicants become aware of their limited life spans, fear of death drives them to seek a longer future commensurate with their implanted memories and growing love of life. Roy especially treasures his warrior memories of past battles and aesthetic spectacles, and he is driven by fear of dying to discover his maker and to be programmed to live longer. When Roy learns that this is impossible, he murders the corporate president Tyrell and also the toymaker Sebastian, who had felt pity for him and taken him to see Tyrell.⁽⁴⁾ When Roy discovers that Deckard has killed his female replicant partner, Pris, Roy becomes inundated by very human feelings of love and loss and rage at Deckard.

Roy, who had been presented as a Nietzschean poet-warrior, renounces his program as a ruthless killer and instead chooses pity and compassion; the Nietzschean *Übermensch* (Superman) thus becomes a *Mensch*, a human being.

In the final showdown between Deckard and Roy, Roy could kill Deckard but chooses not to. Before saving Deckard, Roy says,

"Quite an experience to live in fear isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave."

Roy's transformation stands as one of the narrative's most bizarre and interesting aspects. Roy breaks Deckard's fingers and sadistically torments the detective. He removes most of Deckard's clothing and prances around howling like a wolf. When Roy sees that his own hands are beginning to freeze up — the sign of his impending death — he pierces his hand with a nail to stimulate motor activity. Then suddenly he gains compassion and pity. Whereas he began as an Aryan warrior, he ends a Christ figure with a nail through one hand and a symbolic dove in the other. As Roy contemplates Deckard desperately hanging onto the edge of a roof, Roy strokes the dove and releases it before sparing Deckard, a symbol of liberation and peace. Deckard later says,

"I don't know why he saved my life. Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he did before. Not just his life. All life."

And Deckard goes on to escape with Rachel, portraying the possibility of symbiosis between humans and machines.

BLADE RUNNER privileges empathy as the distinctively human trait, the basis of morality and solidarity with one's fellow beings.⁽⁵⁾ In BLADE RUNNER, the replicants' revolt is portrayed positively as a slave revolt. Deckard empathizes with the replicants' rebellion, refuses orders to kill Rachel, and flees with her with the aid of a sympathetic policeman. The film implicitly rejects aggression and violence, for both the replicant Roy and Deckard renounce their warrior roles. BLADE

RUNNER's vision of possible harmonious relations between humans and replicants can be contrasted to the technophobia in many science fiction films and the simplistic anthropomorphizing of robots in George Lucas' STAR WARS series. Furthermore, STAR WARS celebrates Jedi warriors and military action as high adventure and proof of manhood. BLADE RUNNER progressively renounces violence. This is especially obvious when we look at other recent Hollywood films that celebrate violence and militarism.

SEXUAL POLITICS, ROMANTICISM, AND INDIVIDUALISM

Despite its thematic complexity and questioning of contemporary values and institutions, the film has reactionary features. It is especially regressive in its sexual politics. The two female replicants that Deckard kills are derogatorily portrayed. One seems a whorish temptress, replete with snakes; she violently assaults Deckard. Another, a punk blonde, appears as a symbolic castrator in a combat scene where she uses scissor-like legs to attempt to snap Deckard's neck. In contrast, the "good" female replicant, Rachel, fulfills the common male fantasy of the completely pliant woman who serves all a man's needs. She is usually on hand when Deckard needs her and she even kills another replicant to save his life.

Moreover, the film uses her in a characteristic narrative way to arouse sexual tension, in a scene of threatened rape. Deckard tries to "humanize" her by "liberating" her sexuality. This scene is disturbingly close to presenting male power and violence in the form of forced sexuality as okay. It's shown as a way to "educate" women as to "what they really want" or about "what is good for them." In contrast to the pliant Rachel, the other female characters are her opposite and thus explicitly more *threatening*. They are killed, whereas the more submissive Rachel "gets her man," rewarded with the couple's romantic bliss,

Indeed, BLADE RUNNER ends by evoking romanticism. The heterosexual couple is presented as the route to happiness. The scenes showing Rachel and Deckard's embraces and their escape into nature are unusual in being brightly lit. The final escape and the dove release scene are the only times that the film employs natural color and light. However, the flight from the city into nature is ideologically ambivalent. Previous dystopias, like THX 1138 and LOGAN'S RUN, also show protagonists escaping from regimented authoritarian, bureaucratic regimes into nature. In these films, the escape would be to a conservative haven. It sanctions the return to more traditional (i.e. "natural") political, economic, and social institutions and arrangements.

In general, nature in dystopias plays different roles in different films. For instance, nature can take on a progressive value when it is used to criticize the destruction of the environment or the reduction of life to a profitable machine. In BLADE RUNNER, nature seems to represent a non-capitalist, non-oppressive, ecologically balanced world of compassion and community, a world of peace which rejects violence and

exploitation.

Most returns to nature operate within a liberal individualist framework that privileges individual self-possession and natural right. Thus we see many urban technological dystopias critique the loss of natural land and spontaneous, individual selfhood. *BLADE RUNNER* shares some of this familiar liberal individualism, but it also explicitly critiques corporate capitalism.

Yet the film's ending contains sexist, individualist, and overly romantic elements. The couple's flight embodies a male fantasy of escaping from social responsibility with a submissive woman. In effect, the ending advocates withdrawal and retreat from the inhumanity of capitalism rather than any collective struggle. Whereas the replicant Roy represents militant struggle against capitalist oppression, Deckard represents individualist revolt and flight. In many respects, Deckard is presented as a typical Hollywood individualist hero, the tough guy with a conscience whose rebellion merely amounts to getting away with his woman. The audience is led to identify more with Deckard's safer rebellion than with Roy's. Consequently, the idea of rebellion in *BLADE RUNNER* becomes defused and contained within conventional images of individual rebellion and flight.

The images of Roy, the replicant warrior who finds compassion, are also ambiguous. On the one hand, he serves as an icon of oppression and rebellion. He renounces the warrior role assigned to him by his programming. His poetic meandering combined with warrior posturing, however, makes this character susceptible to being read as a tragic fascist warrior. In fact, Rutger Hauer's Roy has unmistakably Aryan features, so much so that Philip K. Dick told an interviewer that after viewing the initial shots of Roy in action, he thought that he was

"seeing one of those Nordic supermen, one of those blonde brutes that Hitler dreamed of creating in the laboratory."[\(6\)](#)

Roy's motive for his transformation is also unclear. The film privileges Deckard's explanation, as it suggests that the experiences of finitude and empathy are distinctive human traits. In the face of his own death Roy renounces his warrior program. Although the combat scenes seem to celebrate violence and the warrior role, both Roy and Deckard give up violence at the end. Viewers may see this renunciation of violence as a preferred reading of the film.

Yet *BLADE RUNNER* offers no clear vision of liberation. The film's ambiguity in many ways reflects its conflicting views about liberation. Liberation is shown as rejecting exploitation in favor of more rational and humane forms of social and economic life; as renouncing violence and revenge in favor of empathy and compassion; as personal escape or withdrawal; and as the undifferentiated expression of suppressed passions, whatever they may be, and the experience of intensity for its own sake. Roy, in particular, embodies these conflicts. In him, the experience of passionate intensity and revolt against oppression are not

merely valorized but are the same.

BLADE RUNNER's ambiguity, then, makes it hard to appraise the film's ideologies. On the one hand, the film seems to advocate flight into privatism, into conventional romance as escape. At times it seems to privilege an undifferentiated celebration of intensity. But unlike much expressionist art which prefigured fascism in a similar socio-cultural landscape in Weimar Germany, the film does not flee into atavistic mysticism or into a mystified celebration of the fascist warrior or ecstatic surrender. What BLADE RUNNER's conflicting views of liberation suggest most clearly is that segments of U.S. society are seriously disenchanted with capitalism but cannot envisage *how* a liberated society can be collectively constructed or what it would look like.⁽⁷⁾ This confusion leads to privileging havens of privatized empathy and romance so as to resist institutional exploitation and violence.

Such resistance — rejecting dominant public values of corporate exploitation, militarism, and commodification — cannot simply be dismissed as bourgeois privatism. The flight to an empathetic and romantic interior space away from the external realm of public callousness suggests a general human aversion to capitalist market values. In addition, the film's constituting a private realm of resistance provides a space for explicitly anti-market values and suggests that there are needs that corporate market capitalism cannot hope to fulfill (except in the form of religious ideologies). The flight to romance and to nature thus gives rise to at least a double reading. Romance signifies escape but also resistance. It atomizes the collectivity in ways conducive to domination. Yet it also creates a protected arena where a humane autonomy is possible, one founded in compassionate values and one that would be the basis for genuine collectivity. Thus if BLADE RUNNER exaggerates privatism, it may be because in contemporary capitalism humane values are only possible in the private sphere.

Moreover, although these commendable values fit into contemporary U.S. sentiment, their ideological use is sometimes quite conservative. And the film undercuts conservative romanticism in several ways. First, nature is not quite posed as a romantic, positive term against negative society (i.e., technology, the city, industry, etc.). This opposition is undercut through Rachel's flight with Deckard. It is a marrying of machines and humans in a symbiosis that deconstructs nature-technology oppositions despite the film's more general ideological portrayal of nature as an otherness that lies outside of human culture.

The film also questions another romantic opposition, that between analysis (or science) and feeling, an opposition based on traditional distinctions between intellect and emotions. Analysis, instrumental rationality, is represented in the film by machines that dissect human and objective reality. For instance, the police detect replicants with analytic instruments that observe minute emotional reactions expressed in the respondent's eye. Analysis is presented as an instrument of power. Posed against this as a positive opposite is feeling, which the film

presents as resisting analysis. In fact, the first replicant shown, Leon, literally blows the analytic machinery away with a gun when it encroaches even on his "programmed" feelings. As with the first opposition, the film performs a limited deconstruction of this second opposition while nonetheless remaining within an essentially romantic ideological framework that poses feeling against analysis.

In the deconstructive moment, however, feeling is shown to have a rational basis, to be more human than analytic rationality. Empathy and feeling for others are shown to be the basis of human solidarity. Analytic rationality is depicted in turn as irrational and anti-human when used instrumentally in a policed, exploitative, and inegalitarian society. Although the film restores the opposition and finally makes a norm of feeling while denigrating analysis, it can only do so ironically, after questioning the opposition. Deckard's ironic parting line concerning Rachel – "I didn't know how long we'll have together. Who does?" – helps retrieve the film from being too romantically maudlin. By simultaneously questioning and affirming a set of romantic oppositions (nature-culture, analysis-feeling, humans-machines), *BLADE RUNNER* avoids the conservative sentimentalism that characterizes other romantic filmic sci-fi texts, like *E.T.* and Spielberg's other recent films.

Although we see multivalent possibilities for reading the thematics and style of *BLADE RUNNER*, we also clearly see its negative features. Humane values seem to be accessible only through the couple, not publicly. Such an opposition between public and private needs to be undone, and we can interpret the split between public and private spheres as a product of capitalism. From this perspective, in a humane, socialist society, private values would be respected and supported in the public sphere. Vice-versa, social values could be realized in the private sphere.

The exaggerated privatism of *BLADE RUNNER* represents contemporary capitalism where the only space that social and humane values can be practiced is the private arena. In addition, the concluding "utopia" represents a white male projection: Rachel follows Deckard, and Deckard actively drives the car with Rachel passively observing the landscape.

Moreover, the film deliberately establishes Deckard as a white macho figure set apart from the masses of largely non-white street people. Sexism and racism remain acceptable even if apologies for capitalism do not. This suggests that rejecting capitalism may be more thinkable to many people than rejecting patriarchy and racism — as some feminists, blacks, Hispanics and other racial groups have claimed. The striking sexism in a film about exploitation and liberation is revealing and testifies to deep-rooted sexism ingrained in male artists and to the threat that feminism poses for most males.

BLADE RUNNER's contradictory mélange of elements suggests that it can be read as a symptom of ideological confusion and conflict. On one level, *BLADE RUNNER* reflects the conflicting input of the film's

producers and then suggests that collaborative art, if not necessarily democratic, will represent more and more a contradictory mélange of views. As ideological differences sharpen, mass art tries to accommodate these differences, at the same time that it tries to appeal to differences in the mass audience that it seeks.⁽⁸⁾ On the other hand, this film's attempt to produce an amalgam of diverse ideologies points to the absence of a dominant monolithic ideology here. It suggests that ideological conflict, within certain limits, characterizes the contemporary United States.

Conflicting readings of an ideologically complex film like *BLADE RUNNER* are possible and even necessary. Even *BLADE RUNNER*'s individualist and escapist elements can represent cultural pessimism and crisis. The culture industries seem incapable of or unwilling to legitimate ideologies or advocate attractive models of social change. Doing so would make them advocate radical social transformation outside the ideological boundaries of mainstream Hollywood film. Dystopic films like *BLADE RUNNER* open up to critical scrutiny both social crises and various ideological solutions. They thus provide possibilities for a *diagnostic critique*. This would analyze the contradictory ideologies of contemporary Hollywood films and what the films themselves reveal about contemporary society and ideology. Such a cultural critique can be utilized to develop political strategies around the needs, desires, fears and fantasies articulated in popular film. Film can be one index for radicals to use as they seek to develop ways to intervene in contemporary culture which will evoke a popular response. A study of dystopias like *BLADE RUNNER* reveals fears in the United States about losing individual identity and freedom. It also reveals people's compensatory desire for a space of compassion and empathy, one immune to administration, mass leveling and commodification. As *BLADE RUNNER* indicates, the solutions offered for these problems in the contemporary United States are limited by the ideologies of liberal individualism, neo-Christianity, moral romanticism, and the family.

BLADE RUNNER demonstrates the limitations of these contemporary ideologies while seeming to celebrate them. A diagnostic critique of the film heeds points of internal dissymmetry — where the problem depicted exceeds the solutions offered, where what the film describes undoes what it declares to be a way out. The sunnyvale nature at *BLADE RUNNER*'s end, for example, would ultimately relaunch the problem that the film depicts, for the ideology of nature forms the basis of the capitalist ideology that the film critiques. This ideology romantically conceives of nature as freedom, as a self-regulatory and harmonious organism. It thus becomes precisely the legitimating ideology of the capitalist "free market." *BLADE RUNNER*'s apparent escape from monopoly capitalism is thus operated by an amalgamated ideology that combines elements which traditionally legitimate monopoly capitalism. Moreover, as a practical course of action, flight into nature is prohibited by the very features that the film critiques — alienated labor's need to earn wages, total corporate control of the economy and society, and the dominance of exchange value over use-value.

Thus, a diagnostic critique of BLADE RUNNER can disclose that the solutions available in U.S. political culture are limited and often related to ideologies that underwrite oppression. A diagnostic critique of film seeks to outline the contours of those limitations and to point beyond them to solutions which are both attentive to these limitations while seeking to transcend them. It is in such a way that the reading of film might be of use for the development of political strategies for radical social change.

Notes

[1.](#) On dystopias as a literary genre, see Harold L. Berger, *Science Fiction and the New Dark Age* (Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1976). On post-1970s dystopia films, see the study in Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, *Politics and Ideology in Contemporary Hollywood Films* (forthcoming), and on the cultural pessimism in recent science fiction films, see H. Bruce Franklin, "Future Imperfect," *American Film* (March 1973), pp. 47-49.

[2.](#) *L'écran fantastique*, 26 (1982) contains a full dossier of interviews with Dick, Scott, and various other members of the film's production team. We shall draw on this material in the course of our reading.

[3.](#) On the styles, themes, and historical origins and environment of German Expressionism, see Stephen Bronner and Douglas Kellner, editors, *Passion and Rebellion: The Expressionist Heritage* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin Press, 1983).

[4.](#) In an earlier script, after Roy kills Tyrell, he discovers that Tyrell is a replicant too and that Sebastian is really his creator! Roy then becomes furious that "God is Dead," and kills Sebastian! See *L'écran fantastique*, 36.

[5.](#) Jurgen Habermas tells of how in his last talk with Herbert Marcuse, Herbert stated, "I know wherein our most basic value judgments are rooted — in compassion, in our sense for the suffering of others." "Psychic Thermidor and the Rebirth of Rebellious Subjectivity," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 25 (1980), pp. 11-12. In *L'écran fantastique*, the screenwriter Hampton Fancher states that for him, "Empathy is the key to the entire story" (p. 26).

[6.](#) See the interview with Dick in *L'écran fantastique*, p. 21.

[7.](#) According to the discussion in Franklin's article on recent science fiction films (see note 1), ANDROID contains a story where replicants actually and successfully carry out a collective slave revolt; unfortunately, we have not been able to see the film.

[8.](#) The *L'écran fantastique* dossier reveals that screenwriter Hampton Fancher saw BLADE RUNNER as primarily a tale about empathy (p. 26), while scenarist David People said he considered it essentially a police story (p. 31). Sean Young, who played Rachel, said she treated the

film as "a romantic thriller, like CASABLANCA" (p. 48). Harrison Ford (Deckard) perceived it as a detective story in the tradition of Philip Marlowe (p. 47). Ridley Scott interpreted it both as a "philosophical work" and as a futuristic police thriller (pp. 34ff.). Finally, the producer of BLADE RUNNER, Michael Deeley, speaks, who earlier produced THE DEER HUNTER. We suggest that this heterogeneity of input into the film, and the quite diverse ideological positions embodied in the film itself have produced a contradictory ideological amalgam, and that this sort of film requires multivalent readings that unpack the contradictory aesthetic and ideological components.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Tighten Your Belts, Bite the Bullet Cleveland and New York

by Doug Eisenstark

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For those of us who have trouble balancing our checkbooks, much less keeping some money in them, *TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS, BITE THE BULLET*, directed by Martin Lucas, James Gaffney, and Jonathan Miller, seems to take on a monumental task. The film describes and analyzes the economic troubles faced by two U.S. cities, Cleveland and New York. Everyday the newspapers and television scream about the latest budget cuts, service cuts, and unions' "unrealistic" demands. By utilizing a straightforward Marxist analysis, the film looks behind the dominant media's mystifications and scare tactics about these issues. Through *TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS* we are informed and educated about the fiscal collapse of New York City and Cleveland. Politicians, business executives, a seemingly populist mayor in Cleveland, and local organizing efforts in Brooklyn all form a dynamic relation with one another within the film. The film shows us the challenges of fighting a reactionary administration; the limits of progressive leadership within a bourgeois democracy; and the struggles, direct action, and organizing within communities.

TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS' form follows the traditional limits of documentary filmmaking. The film abounds in the use of irony and humor to drive home points that otherwise might be simply depressing. Narration ties historical facts to the current events pictured. Simple animation clearly and economically describes the complex history of immigrant populations who became a vital force in the U.S. workplace and unions. Sync sound and interviews are used well within the film; however, cutaways are sometimes awkward.

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“... we recognize that sacrifices have to be made. It's cruel that it has to come out of the hides of the workers but that's the way it is.” (Senator Proxmire in *TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS*)

TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS looks closely at how cutbacks forced the closing of daycare centers, firehouses, health clinics and hospitals in the New York City area. Interviews with doctors reveal a great deal of bitterness as the doctors point out that the hospitals most affected are in the poorest sections of the city. These hospitals have always been understaffed and underfunded, and cutbacks only make a bad situation worse and create a danger to all patients. Financially poor citizens usually seek medical attention only in emergencies, so emergency and immediate medical treatment in hospitals in poor areas is crucial. With cutbacks, overloads in a hospital often necessitate transferring a patient to another hospital. Yet this increasingly common practice can be fatal. A few years after Gouverneur Hospital was built (through years of community pressure), in-patient service there on the Lower East Side of Manhattan was closed. Designed to handle 125,000 patients a year, the hospital actually had provided service to 380,000 people in 1975. Similarly, Harlem Hospital in Manhattan receives a new patient every 8 minutes. Thus the closing of one bed in a hospital anywhere in the city means that Harlem Hospital (which is also threatened by cutbacks) must run at above a 100% crisis level twenty-four hours a day all year long.

Daycare facilities, vital to a working community, also face increasing pressure. TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS interviews a daycare worker who points out that without financial assistance from the city, her center runs on a hand to mouth basis from contributions from the families involved. They can ill afford added expenses.

Missing from the description of cutbacks is an analysis of the role and position of the numerous labor unions, including public employees. Perhaps the filmmakers felt that such a discussion — with its many contradictions about labor leadership, rank and file issues, and the role of unions — could not be done justice to in the relatively short span of the film. The absent organized labor viewpoint may even deserve a full-length film of its own. Ironically, labor groups (perhaps because they are not critiqued) have been a major source of support for the film, through screenings and sales of prints.

TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS shows us that the manipulation of bonds by the city's largest banks caused New York City's near bankruptcy in the late 1970s. At the same time that corporations received large tax abatements (reductions or exemptions in taxes), banks that had loaned the city money threatened to foreclose on the city government. The same banks then demanded control over the city's governing process. Eventually two private review boards made up of the city's most influential corporate members took control of many governmental decisions through the MAC and BIG MAC review boards. In the words of David Gordon, interviewed in TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS,

“It's like there was a palace coup! ... and they simply said, ‘We won't loan the city any more money if you don't let us take power away from you.’ And so they did it!”

While most Americans would agree that "anything can happen" in New York, we see that any city can become a victim of a capitalist disease called "fiscal crisis," when the film turns to Cleveland, Ohio. It had many of the same circumstances as New York but the results were much different. When Cleveland banks withdrew support for the city, Mayor Dennis Kucinich refused to ransom the publicly owned Municipal Power and Light Company. Behind his decision stood the people of Cleveland, who supported him at the ballot boxes in elections and referendums.

"When you get a bank that thinks it can run the community, that it can blackmail a mayor, then you know the bank's gotten too big for this city." (Cleveland Mayor, Dennis Kucinich, from TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS)

Kucinich comes off admirably in the film, especially when one considers the ridicule he was subjected to through the local and national media. Audiences might feel, as I did, confused when Kucinich is shown to be articulate and clear about his ideas and ideals. After numerous recall and regular votes, he was later defeated in Mayoral elections. He won his initial victory by a margin of only a few percentage points and lost later by a narrow margin, despite continual attack by the Ohio media and the loss of support by the Democratic Party.

A humorous section of the film shows the Cleveland media reporting the fiscal crisis. In a live newscast an anchor person turns dramatically to Kucinich and says, "The ball is squarely in your court, Mr. Mayor." Kucinich's answer is pointed:

"All I have to do is sign my name to this paper, and we have the whole city back again. Baloney. Cleveland Trust cannot blackmail the people of this city. That's what they're doing."

At a black church service, Kucinich outlines the city's crisis in the moral terms of good and evil. TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS emphasizes his speech with a cutaway montage of the city, showing people shopping and working. Kucinich stresses the inherent racism in the city cutbacks and loss of public control of city services. The church sequence merges with a scene of Kucinich at a polka dance. The two sections emphasize the similarities rather than any conflicts in working class culture in the black and white communities.

Later Kucinich is shown with members of the community withdrawing their money from the banks which had put the financial squeeze on Cleveland. But we also feel ambivalence. Although Kucinich might be an exceptionally progressive politician, subsequent events find Cleveland in default and Kucinich eventually defeated at the polls.

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"Well, the thing is planned shrinkage. Burn everybody out. It's ideal property over here. Waterfront, seven minutes from Manhattan by train, burn out these people here, you could

bring back industry. Beautiful piece of land right on the waterfront. You've got a good piece of real estate if they can get it. They're trying to get it by burning us out." (Adam V. in TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS)

In contrast to the high drama of the ruling class, the film also looks at a smaller community that was able to successfully resist budget cuts. When cutbacks closed the local firehouse in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn, firemen and local residents occupied the facility. After eighteen months of organizing, the firehouse finally reopened. Those involved knew the area was being "redlined" by the banks for future development and thus had become prime for arson-for-profit. One wishes that the filmmakers could document more fully the complicity of the banks, developers and city management in this neighborhood. In any case, the actions that the local residents took (including blocking the Brooklyn Bridge) catalyzed the neighborhood to reclaim pride in the area that many had lived in all of their lives. It was just one example of a community which refused to give in to the demands of banks and corporations as they threaten to destroy U.S. cities for their own profit.

.....

"This place can be pulled out of the red with a lot of hard work and with good management." (Ronald Reagan in TROPIC ZONE, 1953)

I expect that the filmmakers, while working on a film for over three years, might have been afraid that its content would be obsolete or of only passing interest once completed. However, since capitalism has a way of nourishing continual fiscal crisis, the film is as applicable today as when it was first tossed around as an idea. The film tells us how industry has moved out of the traditional manufacturing areas to cities in the South and West and to other countries. These new industrial cities and their municipal governments have too often responded to their own fiscal problems by looking towards New York's Big MAC model as a way to temporarily prop up industrial capitalism. The process that TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS, BITE THE BULLET describes, the inevitable instability of the capitalist marketplace, the self-interest of the banks and their politicians — is even more acute under Reaganomics. In many ways the New York experience of turning public services and decision-making over to an elite of bankers and businessmen has represented the start of a national fiscal policy.

Distribution

TIGHTEN YOUR BELTS, BITE THE BULLET is distributed by Icarus Films, 200 Park Avenue South, Room 1319, New York, N.Y. 10003 (212/674-3375).

Sophie's Choice Undeserved guilt

by Phyllis Deutsch

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In many ways, *SOPHIE'S CHOICE* is a good movie. The acting is terrific, the cinematography gorgeous, the soundtrack moving, the dialogue and theme sophisticated and interesting. Flashbacks to Krakow and Auschwitz are realistic and relevant, and the film moves assuredly forward to its dramatic climax. Director Alan Pakula's film version of William Styron's best-selling novel becomes a class act ... such a class act, in fact, that the moral perversity it picks up from the book largely gets lost on spellbound audiences. In their attempts to convey the Holocaust's horror and the torment of one of its survivors, first author and now director have presented us with "works of art" that repeat many of the basic tenets of Fascism.

Both the book and the film are insidiously racist. Most of the novel's anti-black "humor" seems to derive from the character Stingo's roots as a Southern white boy. (In the book we learn, for example, that Stingo funded a life as a starving writer with money recovered from the sale of one of his great-grandfather's slaves. This is a tale told with amused detachment by Styron). Since Pakula seems more interested in the trials of Polish Catholic Sophie and U.S. Jewish Nathan than in Stingo's Coming-of-Age, the director has eliminated jokes about blacks in the film. However, the novel's basic anti-Semitism is faithfully recreated on the screen. Sophie, the heroine of the story, is not a Jew, but a Catholic. Styron probably wanted to remind us that the Holocaust claimed the lives of Gentiles as well as Jews. Granted, but remember that the Nazi's genocidal campaign was *created for* and *systematically aimed at* the extermination of the *Jewish people*. Casting a non-Jewish Sophie, and recreating the Holocaust through her eyes, seriously circumscribes Jewish presence in this filmed calamity.

In fact, the suffering of the Jews always remains peripheral to Sophie's story. Their marginality is emphasized throughout the film by the camerawork. When Sophie visits the Jewish ghetto in Krakow, and later, when she stands in line at Auschwitz, the camera focuses on Meryl

Streep's beautiful blondness. In both scenes, the Jews huddle together in the background, dark and indistinguishable, smaller than Streep, smaller than life. Sophie stands somewhat apart, surveying the crowds; she is not one of them. And she remains quite conscious of her difference. At Auschwitz, trying to save herself and her children, she cries out to a guard,

"I am a Christian. I'm not a Jew, neither are my children.
They are racially pure."

The whole scene is so horrifying that we have an instantly sympathetic response to Sophie. *Her* anti-Semitism seems excusable in this extreme situation. In fact, we begin to feel that Sophie has indeed been given a raw deal; after all, she's not a *Jew*.

The anti-Semitic undercurrent surfaces in the stereotypical Jewish characters that surround Sophie in the United States. Etta Zimmerman, Sophie's landlady, is a friendly yenta whose kibitzing is omnipresent in her pink apartment house. Etta's chatter and laughter do not so much function in the film as signs of life as pointed counters to the deep and meaningful torment of Sophie, the non-Jew. Etta is represented as trivial; Sophie, not. *Blatantly* insensitive is Lisa Lapidus, a voluptuous Jewish Princess, carted out to ease Stingo's horniness. Lisa is tan and dark, wears lots of lipstick, and exposes her bosom. She is self-serving, dishonest, neurotic, and wealthy. She arouses Stingo's passion and then lets him down. Returning home after an unconsummated evening with Lisa, Stingo finds Sophie alone in her apartment. She paces the room, anxiously awaiting the return of her unpredictable lover, Nathan. She wears a tasteful, feminine white dressing gown. One look at this suffering Madonna, and poor Lisa Lapidus becomes a bad Jewish joke.

Nathan represents the worst Jew of all. Nathan is "completely mad" and has spent most of life in "expensive funny farms." He's addicted to benzedrine and cocaine. On a good high, Nathan displays an irresistible joie de vivre. On a bad high, he physically and psychologically assaults Sophie to vindicate the murder of the Jews. Because his treatment of her is so ugly, we cannot sympathize with Nathan's anger. Thus, the film reduces the legitimate rage of the Jews at their greatest tragedy to one man's sadomasochism. Indeed, Nathan treats Sophie in so arbitrary and so cruel a way that it recalls the behavior of her fascist tormentors. Says Stingo, in admiration of the crazy Jew:

"Nathan was a life-enlarging mentor ... he was fatally glamorous."

The same could have been said of Adolph Hitler. Indeed, the depiction of Jews in *SOPHIE'S CHOICE* suggests that Jews — dark, dishonest, vindictive, obsessional, cruel — got just what they deserved.

The film's blaming the victim isn't limited to the Jews, however. If *anyone* is really asking for it, it's Sophie. Sophie seems so completely convinced of her own weakness and complicity that we begin believing

in her guilt. She tells us she disappointed her father by mistyping his anti-Semitic diatribes, remarking, in sorrow, "After that, he could not trust me." Next she relates how the Nazis caught her stealing a ham for her sick mother and sent her to Auschwitz. "You were sent to Auschwitz for stealing a ham?" says an incredulous Stingo. "No," says Sophie, carefully shifting blame. "I was sent because they saw I was afraid." Even now, in the United States, Sophie feels remorse at her inability to make Nathan well. Fleeing Nathan's final murderous rage, she says tearfully to Stingo, "I should have stayed there. Maybe I could have helped him."

Neither author nor director nor fellow characters come to Sophie's aid. The film offers no critical voice telling us — or even hinting — that Sophie has an inaccurate version of reality. This terrible omission allows the audience, numbed by Sophie's continual self-blame, to believe she deserves the abuse she receives — abuse usually delivered by men. In fact, her complete lack of self-assertion, her alabaster fragility, and her evident desire to be punished reduce her to a sex object par excellence. All damage done is admissible because, like the Jews, the film lets her be perceived as less than human.

Just as author and director fail to provide a psychological context for Sophie's vulnerability (by, say, imbuing her with human characteristics other than guilt), they also fail to provide a social or political angle to temper or critique the story's emphasis on sadomasochistic sex. Because the film makes no connections between punitive sex and the world in which it thrives, sex in *SOPHIE'S CHOICE* exists as straightforward titillating power-play pornography. Every come-on to Sophie (and there are many) is preceded or followed by some horrible revelation or action. A Nazi guard surveys her on line at Auschwitz, tells her he wants to go to bed with her, and then takes her daughter from her. Another commandant makes much of Sophie's pure Aryan beauty — a peculiar come-on in view of the fact that her head is shaved, her body emaciated, her face chalky white and gaunt with despair. Clearly, both commandant and guard are aroused by frightened and desperate women; battered is beautiful.

The film indicates that not only German men like their women bruised. Nathan and Stingo continue the tradition. One night, Nathan comes home in a rage. Sophie has been preparing a surprise party for him, and looks soft and warm in a low-cut red velvet dress. Nathan shoves her into a chair, kneels over her, and runs his hands under her skirt and in between her thighs. He begins a vicious diatribe, accusing her of crimes ranging from infidelity to the murder of the Jews.

"Why are you living fucking around while millions of Jews died ... what splendid little tricks and stratagems allowed you to survive?"

This scene is shot from overhead, so it looks like the "lovers" are fucking. As Nathan shouts at her, Sophie whimpers, cries, and, in her halting little-girl English, begs him to stop. The scene ends with a convulsive

orgasmic shudder on the part of both parties.

Sophie's weakness provides the erotic center of this scene, of the novel, and of the film. Even naive and boyish Stingo is set aflame by her scarred wrists, the number on her forearm, her continual tears. Stingo's consummation with Sophie follows her most terrible story, the story of her choice. She tells Stingo, in a stricken and faltering voice, of the guard at Auschwitz who said she could keep one child, but must hand the other child over to him. The horror and terror of the scene is conveyed with uncompromising clarity in the flashback to Auschwitz. As the film returns to an image of Sophie telling the tale in the present, it is evident that nothing will heal this wound. Of the lovemaking that follows the revelation of Sophie's choice, Stingo remarks,

"My lust was insatiable."

There is yet another turn of the screw. Until we know better, we believe that Sophie's choice is going to be between two men. (Indeed, even *after* her story we wonder if she will choose Stingo and the farm over Nathan and the pink apartment.) Hence, the film "ironically" links this woman's greatest tragedy — the loss of her children — to her sadomasochistic sexual relations with men.

Something is morally askew with the very notion of "choice" as exploited in this story. Both Styron and Pakula evidently believe that the decision Sophie made to relinquish her daughter actually constituted a *choice*. In fact, Sophie had *no choice* in the matter. Choice presupposes a range of options in a context of existential freedom. Sophie's decision did not take place under such conditions. She made a *selection* within a narrowly defined context of competing evils; in such a context, choice is impossible. People in such situations have no choice, and to convince them that they do consigns them to lives marred by undeserved guilt. So is Sophie created, a woman so filled with guilt and self-hate that she willingly participates in her destruction at the hands of men. The pornographic male fantasy underlying SOPHIE'S CHOICE comes full circle when Sophie throws herself on the funeral bed with Nathan; the snuff story has finally fulfilled its promise.

Sadly, artists as talented as Styron and Pakula could not sort out the various racist and sexist threads in Sophie's story and use them to make a consistent, critical point about power relations in bed, at work, or at war. If they had, they would have brought us all a little closer to understanding the nature of evil. Instead, they simply perpetuate the abuse of the vulnerable by the strong, and, worse still, do it under the guise of benevolent noninvolvement. The romanticized double suicide which ends the tale underscores the genteel detachment of Sophie's makers; the star-crossed lovers are done in by fate. Stingo reiterates this hands-off policy. Meditating on the deaths of his friends the following day, he says,

"This was not judgment day, but morning. Morning, excellent and fair."

We've come too far, too much has happened, and too much is at stake to accept this retreat from responsibility. Crimes against humanity are *not* fated; they are *planned*. And such crimes are completely comprehensible. Just look at their "benign" manifestations in SOPHIE'S CHOICE. The dehumanization of blacks, Jews, and women, the sickening combination of sex and violence, the massive misnaming and misblaming, the sanctification of suffering, and the elevation of death — all these pave the way for Final Solutions. To prevent the unthinkable from recurring, we must rethink, retrace, and reinterpret the roots of World History. We must also spot the lies in works like SOPHIE'S CHOICE, which, in remembering the past, simply repeat it.

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Prisoner without a name *Argentine nightmare*

by Hal W. Peat

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The eminent publisher of a large South American newspaper opposes, on liberal principles, his country's military junta. In spite of his opposition, he manages to survive. Cocooned by his position from the growing number of arrests, disappearances, and unexplained deaths, he continues business as usual by day and socializes by night with the capital's upper crust. But when the security forces bloody his son during a demonstration and detain the boy's woman friend, the publisher realizes the full extent of the junta's repression.

Thus begins the story of Jacobo Timerman, onetime proprietor of the long established Buenos Aires daily, *La Opinion*, in director/producer Linda Yellen's version of this true story. The irony of the film's title quickly becomes apparent. Jacobo Timerman is a man well-known throughout Argentina, and one of the few such figures the military rulers do not touch, until he becomes involved on behalf of the truly nameless, numberless masses of Argentines who have "disappeared."

Stunned by the beating of his son, Daniel, and by the disappearance of Daniel's friend, Timerman reacts angrily. Up to this moment, the Timermans have been able to convince themselves that they are safe from personal attack by the fact of their visibility and acceptance within the traditional establishment. Timerman even believed that he had some influence within the governing military circles. But when he talks to his friend, Colonel Rossi, about the disappearance of his son's friend, the Colonel subtly implies that Timerman's criticisms of the government in *La Opinion* must cease once the young woman is set free. When a mother of one of the desaparecidos confronts him later, however, Timerman decides to continue publishing news of the disappearances. The authorities respond with one crude final warning: a plainclothes goon barges into Timerman's office and demands that he issue a memo halting coverage of the disappearance of government critics. Still defiant, Timerman throws the man out and vows to begin printing the names of the disappeared.

Jacobo Timerman's own descent into the netherworld of torture, degradation and isolation begins at this point. He is seized, held blindfolded for hours, and finally tortured with electric prods. His former friend, Colonel Rossi, interrogates him. When they eventually allow Risha, his wife, to visit him in his cell, he is almost unrecognizable, a broken man ready to die. Somehow, however, he slowly regains his spirit and strength, aided by a visiting rabbi and, most strangely by the constant unseen presence of his fellow prisoners. They are not only prisoners without names, but also prisoners without faces. Timerman can only glimpse their eyes, peering out of the small apertures in each cell door, but it is enough. "Tonight we conquer death," he suddenly exults. "Your eyes will always be with me." With attention growing in the international media over his disappearance, thanks to Risha's efforts to publicize his case, the authorities shift Timerman from prison cell to house arrest. This comes after a brief hearing before a military tribunal whose officer president asks such revealing questions as, "Are you a Jew?" and "Were you raised as a Zionist?" They do not, as Timerman points out in his speech to this tribunal, inquire if he is a journalist. And it was as a journalist, after all, that he was bound to print the plight of the disappeared in his newspaper.

House arrest proves to be as degrading, as psychologically horrific and tortuous in its way for the Timermans as was actual imprisonment for Jacobo. Bestial guards ransack his home, harass his wife, and refuse him communication of any kind with the outside world. Timerman sends away his two remaining sons, then finally Risha; his now empty bedroom has become his latest cell.

But events in the outside world are slowly working in his favor, though he is unaware of them. The Carter administration, aware of Timerman's case through one of its members who had once met him and been impressed by his anti-junta stance, is reviewing its renewal of military assistance to Argentina. Since human rights is a much heralded priority for the Carter administration, those with particularly grotesque records of human rights abuses are now anxious to clean up a few of the most prominent instances of such abuses. So without any more warning than when they first detained him, Timerman's captors suddenly rush him from house arrest to the airport and a waiting jet that carries him off into exile. Later, Timerman's appearance in the visitors' gallery of the U.S. Congress prompts a spontaneous ovation from the floor. He cannot, as he tells the press in conclusion, forget his former fellow victims still rotting in unknown prisons.

PRISONER WITHOUT A NAME is a ninety-minute, made for TV film, adapted from Jacobo Timerman's own book of the same title published in 1981. That it was made at all for a medium not renowned (in this country, at least) for bringing stories of a politically controversial nature to the attention of millions of prime-time viewers is interesting. That it suffers from many of the most distorting and attenuating conventions of this medium — stylistic, dramatic, and thematic — is not so remarkable, but just as sad, when one considers what a truly incisive, in-depth

rendering of the Timerman affair, in all its international and political implications, might have done for an audience so largely willing to approve the current administration's "low key" human rights policy in its dealings with dictatorships. (Which is to say, tacitly endorsing abuses of human rights by refusing to voice any criticism that might upset these friendly governments.) Perhaps this is demanding too much from a 90 minute TV film; in order to delineate all the interconnections between the Timerman case and the wider machinations of U.S. foreign policy, the filmmakers could probably not have given us the individual, harrowing tale of Jacobo Timerman. Certainly, at this individual level, it succeeds fairly well. The suffering endured by Timerman during his 30 months of imprisonment is made clear enough.

Certain scenes serve superbly in evoking the Timerman's predicament. Jacobo is confronted by a woman demonstrating in a plaza whose son has been picked up and murdered. Jacobo confronts the officers, during his own hearing, with the moral and professional necessity of writing about such *deaparecidos*. Jacobo, with no writing materials allowed him, attempts to use his own blood as ink, but even the quick message he scratches is snatched from his bedroom prison. Liv Ullmann is particularly affecting as a bewildered but determined Risha Timerman. In one sequence following her husband's disappearance, she acts the pleasure loving, flirtatious woman with an army officer in order to wheedle Jacobo's whereabouts from the man. Later, she speaks hesitantly before a group of women at a Buenos Aires fashion show, finding the perfect metaphor when she tells them,

"I suppose human rights are just as out of date as last year's fashions."

Yet director Linda Yellen seems frequently unclear and hesitant about what to depict, and in what detail, whenever she is not focusing solely on the Timermans. Bending to the rules of small-screen drama, she sets up a jack-booted Colonel Rossi as the embodiment of all evil. Rossi torments Timerman and presses for his execution. He arrives melodramatically with a death squad at Timerman's bare apartment as the journalist takes off into exile. Just what the military junta's aims and politics are is never made clear. This blurring is most disturbing in Yellen's "happy ending": the Timermans are free and warmly received when they visit the U.S. Congress. In accordance with the "satisfying denouement" of TV docudrama, everything has "worked out" for the protagonist. Thus the film doesn't even inform us that Timerman was important in the Senate's rejection of Ernest W. Lefever as Reagan's Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, nor that Timerman's stance against the Reagan "low key" policy also continued to generate much controversy around him, nor that the question of some 15,000 to 20,000 other Argentine men, women and children who have disappeared remains unresolved, nor that the complacency of the present administration remains unshaken toward foreign "friends" who brutalize their own people.

PRISONER WITHOUT A NAME provides the viewing public with at least an inkling of the effects of our overseas policies, but it doesn't provide anywhere near a complete and telling picture. In the end, it becomes like too much else that must meet the requirements of "entertainment" and "marketability": "human drama" that exists in a void apart from the social, economic and political factors to which it is actually so intimately linked.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Under Fire Romantic gringo

by Marjorie Woodford Bray

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UNDER FIRE is a Hollywood film which dramatizes how newspeople become supporters of the Sandinista Revolution. It has drawn as viewers many who have become disheartened with how the mass media consistently misrepresent the Nicaraguan revolution. In the movie theater, we are dazzled by UNDER FIRE's scenes with high production values which depict the totality of the revolutionary war, its combatants' bravery, and the contrast between the people's poverty and the Somoza dynasty's sybaritic luxury. We are also moved by the situation's emotion: as the two main characters fall in love with each other, they also fall in love with the revolution.

Nevertheless, upon sober reflection we must ask serious questions about this production. The film's message is, "The first casualty of war is the truth." What, then, is the film trying to tell us about the Nicaraguan Revolution? A fictional film mixed with documentary should create a plot consistent with the spirit of the events which actually occurred. In UNDER FIRE the key situation in the plot, the one during which the major characters decide to support the Revolution, is counterfeit. It not only goes against the spirit of the Revolution, but it also belies ascertainable facts which illustrate that spirit.

The film posits the existence of a young and glamorous revolutionary leader, Rafael. His charismatic leadership seems essential for the rebels' impending success. His face appears on banners, and his name is on the lips of all. Clearly, this inspiring person most closely parallels Carlos Fonseca Amador, but that historical figure was killed in 1976, three years before the overthrow of Somoza. Fonseca's leadership was a legacy of example and ideas, which inspired many followers to continue the revolutionary struggle without his presence. Furthermore, he was not traditionally handsome. His myopia caused him to wear thick glasses, and even that iconography is fondly remembered today by the Nicaraguan people in the lyrics of their major hymn to him. Every poster of Fonseca in Nicaragua, and there are many, show a thin man with

thick-lensed glasses. He was not a hero because he was handsome, and his public iconography does not now have to be "prettified."

In the film, Rafael's death threatens the Sandinistas' victory. The remaining rebel leaders believe that if the masses know of his death, they will become so disheartened so as to lose that success which is almost within their grasp. This proposition provides an ideal dramatic situation for UNDER FIRE's hero, a photographer, who consents to take a picture of the dead leader as if he were alive. This act then symbolizes the photographer's decision to endorse the revolutionary cause. In this story about Nicaragua, where the loss of a leader threatens the entire Revolution, the plot's turning point, based upon that false situation, comes when the main character faces a choice which violates the ethics of his profession. In fact, to show a reporter falsifying the news discredits the nature of the Nicaraguan Revolution and its leaders. They did not need and would not have asked for such an act on the part of a reporter. In the film, such a plotline also discredits the hero himself.

But has not the reporter-hero already been portrayed as a person whose endorsement of the Revolution has an essentially shallow basis? He enters the scene as a cynical conveyor of dramatic images and a technician in the graphics of war. He becomes emotionally engaged by a series of events. He feels affection and admiration for a young rebel, a baseball player, who lobbs a grenade into a belltower from where a surviving U.S. mercenary shoots the youth down. The reporter feels disgusts for the mercenary, for a U.S. public relations man working for Somoza, and for a French informer for the CIA. Yet none of this seems enough to convert a hard-bitten journalist into a betrayal of journalistic ethics. In fact, the film covers this plot weakness with another, simultaneous plot device, the emotional relationship between the photographer and a woman journalist which propels him to decide to take the faked photos. In the film, as the lovers turn to each other and say, "What is happening to us?" it is not clear whether they are referring to their feelings for each other or for the Sandinista cause. In the plot their romantic love is not effectively fused with their support for the revolutionaries, because the film has not made their support for the Revolution credible.

Could the film have supplied this credibility? Of course. Had the authors looked to the real Nicaraguan past for sources, they could have drawn, for example, on the story of other U.S. citizens who lived in Nicaragua at the time of the Revolution — such as the Maryknoll nuns in Leon. Having cast their lot with the Nicaraguan poor in their religious base communities, these women could not leave when the government offered to evacuate foreigners during the final weeks of intense fighting. The women would not take advantage of a safety not available to the people of Nicaragua. These nuns could have demonstrated to the screenwriters how the Revolution was a popular movement, fought by people who had learned to trust themselves, who would not have been paralyzed by a leader's death, no matter how beloved, and who would vindicate such martyrdom by more intense struggle to win.

It was the Sandinista Revolution's humanity that won allegiance from the Maryknoll nuns and other outside observers. Such human concern could be conveyed through film, yet it is absent from this work. That is a serious defect. It means that the film fails to give its characters credible motivation, and it means that the film cannot catch the spirit of history in Nicaragua in 1979.

There are other flaws in the way the film depicts Nicaraguan reality, less critical ones, but ones which could have given the viewer a more accurate picture of why the Sandinista Revolution occurred. The film presents Somoza as venal and vain, but it hides his basic depravity by making him a comic figure. The film shows his taking from the country the bodies of his father and brother but not his looting the National Treasury of all but \$3,000,000. U.S. involvement seems largely a matter of individuals' desire for personal gain; the film does not show U.S. official involvement.

The critical act of espionage — stealing photographs of Sandinistas — is carried out by the Frenchman. (This event itself is unconvincing. Could the Sandinista leaders, always so careful to cover their faces with bandanas, have allowed themselves to be so casually photographed? Would a journalist in their confidence have been foolish enough to have left strategically critical photographs lying around?)

What are the implications of UNDER FIRE? It chooses to depict a nation whose existence is daily imperiled by threats orchestrated by the U.S. government. Here, in the United States, the public relations effort to legitimate our government's goal of destroying the Sandinista government rests on systematically portraying that regime as an aggressive dictatorship, seemingly bent on destroying pluralism within Nicaragua's borders. A major part of this smear campaign depends on the assertion that the Sandinistas have destroyed freedom of the press. Yet UNDER FIRE's central premise — the hero's act of heroism — comes from a fictional act of news falsification. Such a plot line reinforces this U.S. governmental allegation, at least subliminally, in viewers' minds.

Ironically, at the same time that the seriously flawed UNDER FIRE has been released theatrically, another feature-length film on Central America is being made available to the U.S. public. WHEN THE MOUNTAINS TREMBLE has been made about Guatemala by two independent U.S. newspeople, a camera person and a sound person, Tom Sigel and Pamela Yates, who work as a team documenting events in Central America. They became aware of the dimensions of the Central American struggle while filming in Nicaragua in 1979 for network news. Since then, they have sold news footage to networks while gathering their own, brilliantly filmed, radical analysis of contemporary Guatemala. Had UNDER FIRE sought to tell the story of two journalists such as these, its defects as a docudrama might have been avoided. It was Pamela Yates, the sound person, who pointed out to me the sexist and unconvincing role of UNDER FIRE's woman reporter, whose news gathering consists largely of turning on her tape recorder and whose

interview with Somoza is shown to be a disaster as a journalistic encounter.

Once again a Hollywood film fails in its ostensible objective to present a revolution "truthfully." Is this a well-intentioned failure? Or is it a conscious effort to capitalize on a dramatic situation, exploiting a revolutionary ambience without much concern for reflecting accurately the dynamics of real revolution? Or were the critical misrepresentations an effort to depict the Nicaraguan Revolution as one with merely romantic appeal but without qualities which would demand our continued support? For those of us who understand how the Sandinista government is worthy of efforts of solidarity, we should look beyond such a film's surface appeal to appraise its impact critically. Indeed, it is in the making of this kind of Hollywood fiction that the first casualty is the truth.

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The Meaning of Life Laugh at obstacles

by Fred Glass

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From the "anarcho-syndicalist commune" of THE HOLY GRAIL to the fratricidal sectarianism of Jewish liberation fighters in LIFE OF BRIAN, Monty Python has evidenced more than a passing sympathy for the concerns and styles of the left. In these earlier films, though, the British comedy group's jokes tended to be scattered every which way, with the unifying thread — if any could be found — taking the form of an overripe absurdism. Now, what was formerly as often as not squandered to self-indulgence has been brought under control and aligned to a steady purpose: the making of entertainment films that critique the existing order. THE MEANING OF LIFE operates on an overall strategy of subversion: of film and television convention, of its audience's expectations, and of society itself. The writing (and Terry Jones' direction) has grown from mere eclecticism into a broad social vision. It combines self-reflexivity, narrative reversals, associative montage and principled ambiguities into the best English-language Brechtian cinema since THE MUPPET MOVIE. The film is also — literally and figuratively — funny as hell.

THE MEANING OF LIFE lifts its ostensible format from well-mannered BBC documentaries. "Classy" intertitles solemnly announce each section, which correspond to the seven stages of life. Within this loose frame, however, the filmmakers give themselves leave to rake over the coals all things oppressive, in a most un-BBC-like fashion. "Birth," for example, compares hi-tech hospital birthing for the privileged with the unceremonious and nearly unnoticed splatting on to a kitchen floor of the newest addition to a Catholic working class family. Set in "the Third World" (Yorkshire), this sequence becomes a beautifully executed song and dance number (one of several in the film). Beyond parodying OLIVER and MARY POPPINS, the sequence achieves an impressive Stanley Donen-level choreography. The chorus, sung with mock-religious modality, intones:

"All sperm is sacred; all sperm is great; and, if you waste it,

God will be irate."

In another section, "Education," we are treated to a spectacularly graphic sex education lesson in "public school." Boys are punished for missing the point of the lesson by being forced to play in an one-sidedly violent rugby match. Pitting students against masters, the metaphoric implications of classroom competition and sexual insult are carried to a literalized extreme as the "educators" brutalize the boys. This in turn leads to its logical consequence, from organized male team sports to team sports by other means: War. To ensure that no one misses the parallel, a brilliant match cut takes us from a close up of a boy with hands covering his face on the rugby field to another close up of a soldier in the same position on a battlefield.

Such Eisensteinian montage devices are deployed to great effect throughout *THE MEANING OF LIFE*. In the film's opening segment, elderly clerks slave away for "Crimson Permanent Assurance." A long tracking shot along their rows of desks reveals the miserable clerks swaying beneath their burden, as an efficiency expert from Very Big U.S. Corporation looks at his stopwatch and shakes his head. The mournful rhythms on the soundtrack are underscored by a leather, mask-and-muscle-clad, galley beater swinging a pair of heavy hammers on kettle drums. Suddenly we're down in the hold of a Roman trireme, slaves (the clerks) pulling their leaden oars to the accompaniment of a whip wielded by the efficiency expert. With the cut timed to the movement of the oarsmen, we're back in the offices of Crimson Permanent Assurance.

This opening 15 minutes is presented as if it were a short before the feature, including end credits (a bit of chicanery that works so well, most people I've spoken to confessed they were fooled into believing it). The Crimson Permanent Assurance building is expropriated by its old workers from the Very Big U.S. Corporation in response to the sacking of one of their number. Transformed into a pirate ship — all while remaining a 19th century office building — it attacks the gleaming glass towers of modern capital. Then it sets sail (under power of Terry Gilliam's animation) to find more corporate prey. Unfortunately, it tumbles off the edge of the world, while the narrator intones that it would have destroyed all the corporations, only the pirates hadn't taken into account their wrong theory of the shape of the world. You figure it out: is it pure surreal whimsy, or does it refer to the antiquated means and theories of the left in the modern era? During their revolt, the workers fashion their "weapons" by pulling down blades from the overhead fans. They make stilettos with desktop paper holders. Coat racks become grappling hooks, and filing cabinets are rather surprisingly easily transformed into cannon. The office building/ ship itself — straight out of Dickens — sails bravely through the canyons of late capitalism's office buildings, dwarfed by their cylindrical shining surfaces. It manages, nonetheless, to inflict severe damages to the Very Large U.S. Corporation boardroom, setting fire to its computer, killing off its executives, and savaging the surrounding buildings. The relative scale of the antagonists, not to mention the violence of the fantasy,

suggests the relation to reality of the left's permanently crimson (re) assuring dreams.

Or the pitiful strength of British capital relative to its U.S. cousin? The office is reminiscent of hardier times for the Empire. The pirate images recall the Queen's coffers filling through the efforts of Sir Francis Drake and other patriotic buccaneers. The different levels of possible interpretation of this "short preceding the feature," as well as other sequences in the film, bring up one of the dominant formal properties of *THE MEANING OF LIFE*. The Python message has a principled ambiguity, which refuses to admit that any meaning is settled once and for all.

In their earlier work this free-floating quality to the images and stories usually got the better of the films' coherence. Here, though, focused around an appropriate purported theme — the meaning of life, certainly a slippery little devil as far as final definitions go — the ambiguity strengthens the film's flexible form while deepening the political and philosophical discourses spun off by the narrative. Perhaps this ambiguity's most beneficial effect is to ignite arguments about just what it is they *do* mean by this or that scene.

For instance, the playing of women by (male) Members of Parliament raises a question. Is this in the worst tradition of sexist old Thespis, reaching in a line back through Shakespeare to ancient Athens, when only men were allowed to strut the stage. Or is it part of another tradition entirely: of Epic theater, which through such devices as role reversals refuses the audience its usual comfort and safety in identification with players' characters?

In a parody of a British TV show where individuals select their way of death, we watch the man who, condemned to death "for superfluous sexist scenes in his movies," chooses being chased over a cliff by a dozen scantily clad, bare bosomed young women. Without the voice over, the sequence would be unambiguously sexist. But what does the reflexive reference do to the meaning of an otherwise clear image? By Heisenberg's principle, it doesn't do *nothing*. On the other hand, does such self-consciousness atone for the sin? Or is Monty Python simply covering its collective ass?

Such clearly stated ambiguity adds a layer of complexity to the experience of watching *THE MEANING OF LIFE*. We are not allowed to be entertained without thinking about the form of our amusement. Self-reflexivity is not new for Monty Python, but it works most successfully in this film. Avant-garde film theorists in the late 1960s and early 1970s touted the virtues of the "read text" over naturalism, or the subversive power of film art that consciously strove to break illusionism's snare. But most of the products of this set of ideas (including the late 60s Godard, who was arguably the most visible practitioner) never reached mass audiences, or even fairly broad ones. Monty Python seems to successfully approach the happy medium long sought both by the left and avant-garde artists facing the problematic of "purity of ideas, small

audience; (compromised) popularization, large audience.” The group looks as if it is doing exactly what it wants to do — aesthetically and politically — and raking in their numbers for the front office while it does so. However, it is legitimate to wonder just how much audience reflection goes on during *THE MEANING OF LIFE*. Its frantic pace tends to cut back the time necessary to soak in political points. In this respect the earlier *TIME BANDITS*, with its razor-edged slashing of the bourgeois family and consumerism, written by a couple members of the group, is perhaps a better model.

Some people are bound to be offended by what Monty Python wants to do. In fact, Monty Python would be doing something wrong if this were not the case, since they take on multinational corporations, British imperialism, patriotism, religion, male team sports, puritan attitudes about sex, lifestyles of the ruling class and "middle class," the military, pretentious hi-cult educational films of the BBC/PBS ilk, the mystique of science, and not least, the ideological manipulations of the mass media. In this light a word must be said about the infamous "barf sequence," since it is one of the few scenes that might well be capable of offending everyone.

It is as if Buñuel's grossest fantasies have been pushed out beyond all imagining, this hulking rich slob barfing all over everyone and everything in sight. If Buñuel and Dali's original purpose was to "épater les bourgeois" in their collaborations in *UN CHIEN ANDALOU* and *L'AGE D'OR*, today such a goal can only be accomplished by matching the bourgeoisie's own accumulated grossness with images that might have revolted even the surrealists back then. In a world numbed by another half century of capitalist hegemony and (insult to injury) the sensationalist exploitation of its ugly realities by their mass media, what images can shock anymore? Monty Python — give them credit, folks, for such creativity — found one in the image of this bloated-capitalist-to-end-all-bloated-capitalists meeting his just desserts.

Likewise, the live liver "donation" sequence, with its gurgled screams, arterial blood plumes, and handfuls of intestines brandished about before the lens: sure it's gross. But is that all it is? The wife of the just deceased donor is given an unmistakably sexual come-on by one of the white-coated men in order to get her to give up her liver. She demurs. Out of her refrigerator pops a man in top hat and tails (also white), who with a wave of his cane blows out the dingy walls of her kitchen to reveal the star-bejeweled vastness of the universe sparkling around them. They stroll along an invisible path through the firmament. He sings to her about the size of it all, and our comparative insignificance. Completely dazzled by her intergalactic wooing, upon return to her kitchen she agrees readily to give up her liver — and her life.

At first, enchanted by the special effects and music, I thought the scene to be more or less a straightforward paean to the awesome beauty of the universe. At this point I probably would have given up *my* liver. But when we returned to her hovel and she — starry eyed — consented, I

realized with a start that I'd been had, too. It was a smartly executed slash at the hi-tech space films of the past half-decade. It also takes aim at the seductive powers of what Belgian Marxist Ernest Mandel calls "technologism — the ideology that says science and technology — devoid of social content, "neutral" — will take care of us all. The song, perhaps best described as "electric music hall," simply strings together huge statistics for its lyrics. But it is delivered with a subtly understated air of providing profound explanations for — what? Why one should give up one's life for science ...? But even after ruminating thus, my first impression stayed with me. And I was left with the by now familiar unresolved tension between my enjoyment of the acting, song, special effects, etc., and the message that undercut that enjoyment.

Optimism is not *THE MEANING OF LIFE*'s strong suit. I have heard the criticism that the picture painted by this group of humorists is so dark that ultimately, after the belly laughs subside into fitful giggles of remembrance, one's mouth tastes of ashes. It's true their vision — however hilarious — is such that the bold, gay colors never quite manage to cover up all the black. My response is, so much the better. The film — because of its atypical form — makes an interesting test case for the old debate over whether left wing art ought to offer explicit solutions to the world's problems. Once more Buñuel, whose own films are consistently "funny as hell," provides an illuminative example.

In *LAND WITHOUT BREAD (LAS HURDES)* Buñuel drew no explicit revolutionary lessons about the incredible poverty, ignorance, superstition and exploitation he found in that tormented land. But the entire film is riddled with contradictory ironies and cruel jokes. It's as if to say that in the face of a social situation so bleak and disturbing, the only possible response is a savage black humor, within whose anger one might discern the outline of its causes which otherwise would go nameless: and which promises to be seen again, in other social forms, later on.

The discomfort that some scenes in *THE MEANING OF LIFE* engender is due to a similarly volatile brew of humor and anger. Marx, in a famous passage, claimed that history only raises problems for which the solution already exists, at least in embryo. But the solution to the problems raised by Monty Python in their latest film has become, over several generations since Marx's time, an overdue fetus indeed, blocked in birth by some very large obstacles (Very Large U.S. Corporations?). Until such time as those obstacles are removed, one could do worse than have a few laughs at their expense. In fact, such laughter might prove in the long run to contribute more than we might expect toward the obstacles' removal.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Interview with Daniel Solis Betamax and Super 8 in revolutionary El Salvador

translated by Julia Lesage

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Latin American film
— the editors

JUMP CUT has long been committed to radical cultural institutions both in the United States and abroad. Here, we offer a group of articles on revolutionary Latin American film and video, and we will take up the theme again in the near future. There seems to us to be a new upsurge of radical cultural activity in all of Latin America and new receptivity to it in the United States. Clearly, the Sandinista triumph in Nicaragua in 1979 and the advances of the FMLN-FDR in El Salvador have had a tremendous impact both in Latin America and here. Amidst the poverty and revolutionary upheaval in these Central America countries, emphasis has shifted somewhat from feature-length films to more mobile and less expensive media: super-8 and video, as well as radio, music, networks of video exchange, mimeographed publications, wall art, posters, and graffiti.

In this issue, John Mraz reviews two recent books on Mexican film history; he discusses the political issues involved in the historiography of Third World commercial filmmaking, distribution, and exhibition. In contrast to Mexico's extensive commercial film production, small formats — super-8 and Betamax video — play a major role within revolutionary El Salvador. In an interview here, video editor Daniel Solis discusses the tactics of Salvadoran film and video makers working with the Radio Venceremos system in Morazan province and explains how they do collaborative media work with revolutionary peasants. Two Cuban filmmakers are represented in this issue as well. Pastor Vega (PORTRAIT OF TERESA), who directs the

Havana Film Festival, discusses with Sérvulo Siqueira the festival's origins and its contribution to advancing the exchange of ideas and resources among militant Latin American filmmakers. Tomás Gutierrez Alea (MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT, DEATH OF BUREAUCRAT, THE LAST SUPPER) has written a theoretical study of the relation between popular filmmaking and spectators in Cuba, where there is a great love for the entertainment film. A translation of that book by Julia Lesage will appear in its entirety in JUMP CUT, beginning with this issue.

This new Latin American film and video movement indicates that we need new film and cultural theory to talk about the new film and audience relations which are emerging from political struggle. It was within the context of the Russian Revolution that widely varying experiments in narrative film were carried out by Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Dovzhenko, and Pudovkin, whose films had broad popular appeal. The revolutionary struggle in Latin America is changing culture as it is changing society. Cultural transformation also becomes a powerful factor in the total transformation of social relations. As artists in El Salvador create alternative forms of communication, they do so fully incorporated into the social and political battle. They are creating a whole new culture — teaching literacy, denouncing atrocities, giving accurate information about current events (for example, most people in El Salvador now listen to Radio Venceremos to learn what is going on), writing history, expressing the people's voice, and articulating and helping shape social structures. Although this entire alternative culture is very vital, we receive little information about any of it in the United States. In general, this alternative culture is specifically anti-imperialist. These radical cultural workers see themselves as part of the organized left political opposition to U.S. domination of Latin American politics, culture, and economic life.

U.S. military intervention in Central America demands that we all take an active stance and resist our government's policies. That we live inside a country which is the economic mainstay of and arsenal for murderous dictatorships often depresses us and may lead to feelings of inadequacy and social paralysis. But the revolutionary cultures of Latin America let us see that very profound social transformation is possible. Our struggle here in the "belly of the monster" differs from that in El Salvador, but their revolutionary culture is a sorely needed gift which our Latin comrades offer us as a message of hope. The very existence of such a vital resistance culture in the face of horrible repression opens up new possibilities for us, as does the existence of new social forms in Nicaragua and Cuba. As we learn about others'

profound social and personal change, depicted in Latin American revolutionary culture, we can imagine change for ourselves.

Note

JUMP CUT co-editor, Julia Lesage, taught super-8 filmmaking with the Sandinista labor union, the Central Sandinista de Trabajadores, in November, 1981. Her interviews with Nicaraguan women were combined with those done by Carole Issacs in an issue of *Voices from Nicaragua*. We are sending our subscribers a free copy of this issue as a bonus. For others who would like to receive this publication, it is available for \$2.00 from Voices from Nicaragua, 1632 N. Milwaukee, Chicago IL 60647

Interview with Daniel Solis Betamax and Super 8 in Revolutionary El Salvador — translated by Julia Lesage

This interview with a representative of Radio Venceremos, Daniel Solis, describes film and videomaking inside the Salvadoran revolution. Daniel Solis is a video editor. See JUMP CUT, No. 28, for an interview with Lucio Lieras, cameraman on DECISION TO WIN.

Solis: Radio Venceremos began audio-visual production with compañeros from the film collective, Zero á la Izquierda (Zero to the Left), which had made various short subjects and the feature-length, DECISION TO WIN. Last spring we saw the need to produce film and television within the Radio Venceremos system. Soon we expect to be able to put on TV programs. Also, up to that point Radio Venceremos had provided a lot of cinematic material for others but had not taken on all the film work integrally, in the sense of being able to edit and distribute.

We had done collaborative projects here with people like Teté Vasconcellos and Diego de la Texera, getting them material to edit, but had not done an integral audio-visual production ourselves. So our first complete production and distribution of a film was with LETTER FROM MORAZAN, a movie about a military campaign in the department of Morazan from June to August, 1982. The importance of this experience can be seen in various aspects. First, we reached a good level of technical accomplishment, especially in our learning to operate and use cheap equipment. DECISION TO WIN and also the short films that Zero á la Izquierda made were filmed in 16mm. LETTER FROM MORAZAN was shot in Super 8 and Betamax, both for economic reasons and for easy movement, for example, in ambushes and in actual fighting. Later all this material was copied to and edited on 3/4" videotape. The editing was done in Mexico because, of course, Morazan did not have any kind of facilities for editing.

The great advantage we discovered in using video is that the people who have been filmed can see the production directly. Before when we filmed in 16mm, the film was sent, let's say, to be developed and edited in Mexico. There'd be a delay of two to four months. At best the people would see the completely finished film maybe five or six months later. Now the way we are working allows much better and more direct participation of the people themselves. The people among whom the combatants live can comment on what has been filmed.

For example, we had a great experience in Anamoroz in the province of La Union in November, 1982. It's a town that has no movie theatre; some people go to movies every two, three, or four years in the district capital. Well, at the same time the FMLN came, these people got introduced to film, but to activist film. The FMLN had taken that town after a series of combats, during which they had filmed in Betamax. Each night in the town they'd show the tape from that day. The people would comment on seeing themselves and their friends, as with, "Oh, there you are." One fine scene showed soldiers in a tank surrendering after the guerrillas threw a grenade. Those prisoners were in town the night the compañeros were showing their color videotape.

And so everybody in town began to comment on it and talk about what had happened. People said, "This looks good," or "I don't think that was done so well," or "I don't think you should have filmed it that way. You should have filmed from another point of view, another perspective, another angle." Many of the people were not that technical, but they commented a lot along those kinds of lines.

Our richest experience in LETTER FROM MORAZAN came in having a lot of people participate, not just a group of three or five filmmakers who would come to the area on a certain day and maybe stay a month, but then leave to edit their movie outside the country. Now we have two camera people who stay permanently in the zone; only I leave the country. They shoot the material, talk about it with the people, and for technical reasons send it out of the country for editing. We edit in 3/4" video and then transfer to 16mm film for distribution abroad. In El Salvador we don't have the capacity to distribute 16mm film, we transfer to 1/2" videotape, which we can show even in the enemy's own zones, that is, in the capital.

After LETTER FROM MORAZAN our crew began to film a whole lot of material, too much, because we didn't have the capacity to edit everything that came back to us. Also, that filming served a little like school. For example, the compañeros began to realize how many different kinds of things they could do. Some tapes would serve our people as a kind of military training school — like teaching how to make explosives. Or, they could film a seminar about a political development, or people talking about their life in testimonials. And the crew could do all those things within the zone itself. Generally this material does not get much editing, just eliminating extraneous or badly filmed material. This kind of video material circulates now on Betamax a lot in the

interior, and people use and talk about it a lot.

In December 1982, a meeting took place with the cadre doing political work in the eastern front. The meeting lasted several days and was filmed completely. The tape then became a very dynamic element in our political work. Edited, we have about five hours of it on tape, showing the reports, the questions, and also all the people's reactions. You know, a report is not just a speech but is given in an emotional context. The tape shows how people received the reports and what was of interest to them. As this kind of video material circulates in the interior, it has its own autonomy and strength. And now we have the people's massive collaboration. It's no longer like DECISION TO WIN where the compañeros came and filmed for a certain amount of time and then left to edit. Now film and video maintain a permanent presence at the front.

Lesage: As they watch the tapes, what kinds of criticisms do people make about the material?

Solis: Watching sections of LETTER FROM MORAZAN, they talked a lot about the issue of humor. In the midst of war, the film speaks full of humor. It's not a solemn picture, but gives all the people's local expressions. Some of our compañeros said that war meant the sacrifice of human life, and they could not talk about war with any humor. Another point of view saw humor as indicating not disrespect but rather the people's way ,of talking.

Lesage: It's also a way of surviving.

Solis: Humor represents something really popular, from the people. As combatants have just come from a heavy bout of fighting, they describe it with humor. It's not like some kind of neat military communiqué that tells how many people fought, a whole column. The combatants describe the battle with images and expressions, sometimes with exaggeration. However they speak, they never have a cold or expressionless way of describing things. So we've had a lot of discussion of this. Some say, "You have to treat this more seriously," "Look, we've got to show how much sacrifice we've given for this cause." I mean, part of LETTER FROM MORAZAN may give the impression that the war is rather easy. You see the FMLN's force as an army and the Salvadoran army's soldiers' giving up. You don't see what's really so difficult for this town which is experiencing the war. That's the kind of talking we did with the townspeople.

Another kind of discussion which didn't offer criticism as much as positive feedback emphasized the question of point of view. In some scenes in the film, you have the impression that only a combatant would have been able to film them. In that sense, the camera is exactly at the same angle that a rifle would be, and even the movements of the camera indicate how you must move in combat. The film explores the cinematic problem of what it means to use a subjective point of view. In one scene, one of the combatants says to the cameraperson, "I'm going to throw a grenade," pointing towards a tank. Now that's a scene that camera

people who weren't combatants would never get, because you see an extraordinary trust between fighter and filmmaker as well as the filmmaker's capacity to thrust himself into the midst of battle.

Lesage: Well, that's exactly the reason you have to teach women to make films. Because if you don't, then your films will never contain that perspective which shows how women enter into revolution. It's just like what you told me about getting the combatant's point of view. That is, if you need that point of view to be able to film a combat, you need women filming if you want to film the fact that women are entering into revolution and to describe how they enter into revolution. And if you want to know how children participate, then you have to enable children to have some voice in the process, too.

Solis: We must recognize this as a severe limitation. In the whole Radio Venceremos system there are many women, including the director of Radio Venceremos, Commandant Luisa. But we have no women filming or editing. This affects the films themselves, where you don't see the participation of women or their genuine role.

Lesage: It's more than that. It's an issue of building women's participation. In order to do that, you have to come to see things from the perspective of women's lives, so as to understand how women might conceive of their own roles. Often a woman enters into the revolutionary process through a completely different path than a man.

Solis: At the level of radio shows, we had a series of interviews and testimonies from women compañeras from different sectors — market women from San Salvador, farm women, university women — talking about how they became incorporated into the revolution, how they evolved, what kinds of conflicts they have had with their family or husband. They discussed everything related to women in the revolution, all the issues they came up against. But up to this point, that effort hasn't been translated into film production. I agree with the criticism. Obviously women are one half of the population, and to represent them is an important necessity.

To get back to our discussion of filmmaking, after we filmed *LETTER FROM MORAZAN* we also filmed a lot in Super 8, but the developing has to be done outside the country and Kodak has a monopoly on it. It does not offer video's advantage of having people seeing it at once and directly. We do have about an hour's worth of Super 8 film which we filmed during the battles of Usulután, Berlin, and San Francisco Javier.

The second big production we did was a 27-minute documentary tape on the role of the Church, a tape we did in conjuncture with the Pope's visit. The role of the Church in the revolution was an important issue which we wanted to treat in depth, although the Pope's visit made us do it quicker than we would have done otherwise. In part, the tape offers a portrait of the Church's struggling alongside the people. It begins with a Mass being celebrated in a zone controlled by the FMLN in Huateca. Then, for about half the tape, there is a long flashback showing the

history of the Church since the times of Monsignor Romero. Testimonies describe the evolution of the Church and its repression. Of course, anybody who speaks about the Church here also has to talk about repression.

The second half of the film describes Christian community work in Morazan, a war zone, and we see a certain progression in that the first Masses have only combatants and the last is a fiesta of the whole town. Then a little group of musicians play "The Bridge Over the River Kwai" before the Mass, a priest gives a sermon, and all the people go to communion. That was filmed when the FMLN took Corinto. The movie ends with a procession which is fascinating in that it combines traditional elements, such as a statue of the Virgin, with other elements from the people's church, such as a song which says,

"Christ, you identified with the people, the poor. People, you don't have to identify with the oppressor class. It devours the poor. Identify with the poor themselves, lowly and humble."

It's not exactly the same as the peasant Mass sung in Nicaragua. It's a people's Mass sung in the times of Monsignor Romero here in El Salvador and was derived from the Nicaraguan peasant Mass but adapted to our circumstances. What really gives a lasting impression in the film is this combination of very old, traditional elements, such as the cult of the Virgin, with these elements that reflect the Church's coming to political awareness, which has really played an important role in El Salvador today.

In terms of our new projects, we plan to do a film on the prisoners we've captured from the Salvadoran army. In 1981 through March 1982, we've taken over 500 prisoners from the Salvadoran army who surrendered after a battle. After each battle they're giving up easier and easier. Before, they were really afraid to do so because they'd been told the FMLN would kill and torture them. But now there have been massive liberations of these prisoners. That is, they don't stay very long in our zones, a few days or at most a few weeks and then they're handed over to the Red Cross. Since these soldiers now know that nothing will happen to them, they surrender easily.

It's important to do a film with these war prisoners because they talk about the FMLN from another point of view. Usually they make a comparison to the dictator's army. They see here that the FMLN officials eat the same tortillas as the soldiers and that there's no brutality towards the soldiers. Here the guerrilla army discusses the goal of every battle so that every FMLN combatant knows why s/he is fighting.

In the Salvadoran army, it's exactly the opposite. The officers have their own special mess and other privileges. Often they rob money from the enlisted men's mess for their own food and medicine. And the government's officers hit the soldiers. Above all, the Salvadoran soldiers can never argue about or discuss about where they are going. They are just sent to a certain zone and told about it just a few hours before they

go there. That's it — period.

We think it's very important to depict the war from the Salvadoran soldier's point of view. These prisoners are usually just ordinary people who were drafted and required to fight or joined for economic reasons or accepted the ideology of the enemy. Often these soldiers have a whole value system which is exactly the same as that of the rest of the Salvadoran people — they want equality and a more just life. This is a kind of film we want to get distributed in and around the zones of the enemy. The most fundamental thing is that the soldiers themselves see this film. We don't think distribution will be easy. But because we've had this experience with the tape we made so quickly about the Church, we know we could show it around San Salvador with a network of video recorders. We did that already both before and during the Pope's visit. Optimally we can do the same with a tape about the Salvadoran army.

Already this new tape has an important character in it, Colonel Castillo, Vice-Minister of Defense whom we captured in June 1981. He relates his own testimony about his capture, and we also have footage from the very day of his capture. Just on the level of the imagery itself, you can see the colonel change. At first he visibly expressed a lot of fear and was convinced the FMLN would torture him. A few months later the same colonel is now very calm, smiling and speaking very easily. This project will have a lot of impact. We already know from our work in the radio that members of the army listen to Radio Venceremos a lot. In fact, Radio Venceremos does a lot of work to try to reach soldiers.

Our other project is to do a film about international solidarity. Up to this point the whole process of filmmaking in El Salvador has been to make films used out of the country. Even if people from inside look at and comment on this material, what does it matter because it's meant for foreign consumption, and foreigners will see it first? Now we want to do the opposite, inform the peasants that the struggle in El Salvador is not an isolated struggle and that the people's war has won broad, worldwide sympathy. We want to depict all the forms of solidarity that exist in their richness and diversity, not just demonstrations, parades and speeches, but music, paintings, murals, hunger strikes — all the kinds of things going on. And the film will not show just one type of person, like Mexicans who are very similar to the Salvadorans, but Japanese, Algerians, Mozambicans — people from every country. It's important to show that the FMLN and our whole people's struggle have gained an international support, so as to be able to understand this beyond our own subjective perspective. Not only are we happy that all these other people are mobilizing for us, but we see it objectively as the most powerful hindrance to North American intervention. That is, if such a strong solidarity movement didn't exist, clearly the administration would have sent many more military advisors and would have been able to intervene more directly militarily. U.S. military intervention would have been executed with a lot more force. We consider this a powerful, objective element in our struggle. We want the people inside El Salvador to realize the significance of what this element is. Such a film will let

people see that ours is not an isolated struggle, and it will allow them to evaluate more precisely the forces we can depend upon. There is a military factor operating inside the country, but there's another factor, the people's support, and that factor extends internationally.

We also want to start building up a whole structure of distribution inside El Salvador. Up to this point we haven't seen any possibility for distributing 16mm film because of the weight of the equipment and of making copies.

Lesage: Are there people who have video recorders at home? Or are these machines in churches or schools — where are they?

Solis: First, there's Betamax video equipment on the front in the combat zone. Let's say, a platoon in Morazan would have some video equipment, and the videomakers accompany a military action which is going to seize a town. In organizing such actions, people are saying we have to provide arms, food, and medicine, and also now video equipment. Obviously it's not always materially possible. But politically we're convinced that to take a town does not mean just to take it militarily. It has to be thought of in terms of our whole encounter with the people there. When the FMLN comes, they have to come with everything; even a priest will come with us and say Mass there. Sometimes we come with movies, sometimes with photo exhibits. Really, we'll bring any kind of material which would facilitate communication with the townspeople. I think that film and video are the very best instrument, obviously better than a photo exhibit or a magazine or newspaper. Sometimes video is even better than a meeting. A meeting in combination with it is certainly a lot better.

In the capital or the other zones occupied by the enemy, Radio Venceremos has a certain limited infrastructure. We are exerting a systematic effort now to develop that infrastructure. Our first really positive experience was around the Pope's visit. Because of the conditions in San Salvador, we didn't have large meetings but many showings at people's houses with five to fifteen people. We copied this material on a lot of different cassettes. What's really humorous is that Salvadoran television got some of our tapes and used some of our visual material, of course with other commentary. This represents a positive break in the whole circle of misinformation, at least on the level of imagery if not on the level of sound. People in San Salvador could see on the dictator's television system images of the Church in the zone of Morazan. Although the sound track said those priests were communists and atheists ... the images showed a kind of resistance.

I do not know how many copies of the tape about the Pope's visit circulated because people make their own copy. The tapes are edited outside of the country and then brought into San Salvador in limited quantity through the controlled zones. Later other people copy them. I do not know whether there are twenty or thirty copies in San Salvador. All I know is that the tape got around a whole lot. Certainly the infrastructure in San Salvador of video recorders is not huge. Of course,

at the front itself we are making copies of these tapes.

In a zone that is not yet a liberated zone, we often have a kind of political control. These zones are at the periphery of the liberated zone. In Morazan the FMLN forces have both political and military control. But in many towns near there the enemy can return when they want; it will cost it a lot, but they can return. In those towns, however, there is a permanent, political presence of the FMLN. For example, if the FMLN takes a zone, people just keep going on with their marketing and people from other towns come in as well to do their marketing. This happened in Corinto, which has an important market for the whole zone. The FMLN had occupied Corinto for about two months, and people from all the other towns, even from towns controlled by the Salvadoran army, would be going there to market. There they could see these films and tapes and could talk to people from the FMLN. They went to cultural functions organized by the FMLN. This is really important. We have generated a widespread zone that cannot be called liberated, because we don't have military control, but where systematic work is being done with the people. And in this area, film and video play an ever more important role.

Lesage: How many people are teaching film and video production there right now? That is, how many people are sufficiently adept so as to be able to teach the others?

Solis: Well, of people who have all the skills, just two have a lot of experience. One, Gustavo, learned by making films. He never went to any film school, but he was always interested in filming. First he did a lot of photography, then filmmaking. He did that for about three years and now he's a fine, efficient cameraperson. Another compañero, called the Marvel, studied filmmaking abroad (we don't have any film schools in our country) and had good training before he started making political films. Now maybe seven or nine people, I don't know how many, help out.

We incorporate as helpers people who don't work regularly as camera or sound person but who are active in combat or are members of Radio Venceremos. They begin as helpers, and little by little they come to understand how their whole role works and then function in a more effective way. For example, in the zone of Guazapa there was a compañero who'd been filming in Super 8. He'd just filmed his sister's wedding before that, or something like that, and had never had any training. Well, his first rolls which he sent us from Guazapa were impossible to edit because no shot lasted more than a second and the camera was always waving around. That footage made you dizzy. But now this compañero is producing better material.

What we do with these people and others working in television is to establish a permanent line of communication. They give us their perspective on the editing, and the people doing the editing tell what they think about the quality of the footage from a technical point of view and about the type of filming done. And now when I look back at the

materials we got over a year ago, I can see a strong improvement in what we're getting now. For example, the last footage I was able to see was in Super 8 and showed the seizing of the town of Berlin. It was really high quality.

Lesage: How do you maintain your equipment? Who can repair Super 8 cameras? Do you have people who can keep up video equipment?

Solis: Up to this point we've bought really cheap, used equipment when we could find it. And when it gave us too many problems, we'd just throw it out. We just cannot repair more than small problems. With cameras, primarily we have problems like blows or dropping them. If you're filming in an ambush and are knocked about, you might drop the camera. That'd be the end of it. The other big problem we have is mold from the humidity; when mold gets inside the lens, we cannot repair it, so we just have to leave the camera behind.

Lesage: How do you get Super 8 film? Does everybody who comes back from abroad, especially from the United States, bring film?

Solis: We often present our films in the United States, Mexico and other countries, and through those showings or on the basis of other contracts with film people, we're building up our film and tape supply. Neither Super 8 nor video is as expensive as 16mm film. However, our compañeros are always filming at the slowest Betamax speed, which saves tape but does not give the best image quality. We're saying to them, "Listen, you should film at least with the middle range speed." What's considered the normal speed uses up more cassettes. But even for us the cost of a videocassette isn't that high, and up to this point we've been able to keep sending a sufficient quantity to our crew. Obviously, this kind of work depends upon solidarity from other countries, because in El Salvador in no way could we buy this material. We must buy everything abroad including the cameras.

Lesage: How do people react to your work who live in areas where they haven't seen a lot of film and people who live in the capital who see a lot of TV and film? Do these people have different reactions?

Solis: It's a little difficult to generalize, but one difference perhaps can be seen on the level of rhythm. People who go to a lot of movies and see a lot of TV (our people see gringo productions or maybe Mexican ones) are accustomed to a very rapid rhythm; that is, they see sequences where in two minutes the whole narrative situation completely changes. To make it very schematic, people in the capital would say of our films, "Those movies really are slow."

You'll see the preparation for an ambush and the time it takes for the trucks to arrive, little by little. The people waiting for the ambush say, "Oh, here come the trucks. We'll get started soon." Thus, in *LETTER FROM MORAZAN*, an ambush lasts approximately five minutes in film time.

People accustomed to TV think that in five minutes the whole world changes; it just can't be that slow. Rural people are more accustomed to this slower rhythm, and I think it gives them greater pleasure. In some way you might say it is a little more authentic. That is, we describe the preparation and the movements more. Even better, we show the psychological state. Action isn't continual throughout the entire film. If you want to sum up what the film has in terms of action, you could make a ten-minute film — that is, if you just wanted to have only action. As a filmmaker I may just be projecting our own ideas. But I do think we are in touch with some aspect of reality here. Maybe rural people have a certain way of seeing, one that demands another kind of or greater authenticity at the level of discourse or speaking.

As a general principle, we work very little with voice off. Of course, we can't avoid it, but whatever possible we try to let the people themselves speak. *DECISION TO WIN* has not even one second of voice off. It uses pure testimony from the people. In a *LETTER FROM MORAZAN*, we did not need to explain whole military strategy, but we had some need for commentary. So we did it in the form of a letter. The advantage was that a letter could describe situations we couldn't film, such as things that happened at night. Later we realized that this narrative strategy of a letter let us use and valorize people's everyday vocabulary, that which they'd speak to describe their own combat and their own life. In the tape we made about the Church, we also needed some commentary — since we were using a flashback and since we needed some kind of global explanation. We didn't have a film archive or interviews that could achieve such a narrative function.

In general, we are responding to the need to let the people speak, not to load up the verbal narration nor to make one more militant film filled with speeches by leaders. We do not want to orient our films only around interviews with the military leaders. Obviously, we are not forbidding the commandantes to speak in our films, but it's important to describe this revolutionary process as the process of a whole people.

Lesage: For that reason, do you interview as many women as you do men?

Solis: No, not till this point. For example, *DECISION TO WIN* shows very few women. In the tape about the Church, we hear women's testimonies, but mostly about the repression. Well, of course, that's also the Church's problem; there aren't priests who are women.

Lesage: But your problem is in not imagining that you could use women's voices to offer the militant analysis. Filmmakers have to question how they choose what to film. At this point, if you don't have women filmmakers, the male filmmakers must keep thinking about their own limitations and compensate for them.

Solis: Yes, but in *LETTER TO MORAZAN*, Comandante Ana Guadalupe Martinez gives information about the situation as a whole. That film has very few interviews — one with her, one with another compañero, and

one with the prisoners of war. Of course, there aren't women among the prisoners of war since the enemy army doesn't have any women soldiers.

Lesage: When ordinary people speak in front of the camera in these interviews, how is their manner of speaking different from the way leaders speak?

Solis: When a leader speaks, it is speech which is really pretty well constructed or preconceived. Leaders know what they are going to say and that it's going to take so many minutes — that they are going to cover x number of points in y number of minutes. I could say, "Look, you've got three minutes in which to describe the internal situation in this region." Then they'd go ahead and do that.

When people from the community speak, you have to respect the way they tell their story. By our standards, before they arrive at the most interesting point, the point we want to hear about, first they might describe the whole context, including their own life or something that has just gone on in the town. Then they might get around to the point we were interviewing them on.

Actually these people have no fear of the camera, which is something positive. This happens because they see the filmmakers as part of the FMLN — that is, as just like themselves — taking the same risks, dressed in the same way, eating the same food, and getting around by foot. It's not like when a film team comes in from CBS in a jeep with all of its equipment. Those people are a lot more impressive than we are — our crew certainly is not that big and we don't have much equipment. The first thing that CBS asks when they get to a town is for someone who speaks English; later they might have to do an interview in Spanish if no one speaks English. Well, it's just not like that with us. We're doing interviews having taken the position of the combatants ourselves and speaking the same as the people. We not only speak the same language but also know all the people's experiences. Interviews are a lot easier to do, and some of them even achieve a comic effect.

For example, during an ambush, the cameraperson was so happy when the soldiers began to give up that he began to scream and shout. At the same time that he's filming, you hear his voice screaming, "Long live the people's revolutionary army." When the soldiers come, he begins to ask them questions in a very emotional way. To a young man who doesn't have a uniform, the cameraman shouts up, "Son of a bitch, what are you doing up there in that tank?" Well, that clearly is not a CBS interview style, but that of a filmmaker who's a combatant. Again, when interviewing a captured soldier, he says, "Listen, keep your hands up. You just gave up, so you've got to keep your hands up."

These interviews reveal human concerns. The same cameraman was doing an interview the day Colonel Castillo was captured along with another soldier. While interviewing the colonel, suddenly the filmmaker turned to this other soldier and said, "Listen, what do you think about what one of your top chiefs is saying here." It was a cinematic way of

breaking down a hierarchy within interviews. We always keep trying to elicit a soldier's point of view. The soldier said, "Well, Colonel Castillo is telling you he is not in agreement with the army because he wants to save his life." Colonel Castillo then justified himself in a really aggressive way against the soldier. A whole dialogue began between these two, the soldier and the colonel. That was really interesting because certainly, it was the first time the soldier had had the opportunity to speak directly from his own perspective to an officer. Before, officers would always yell at him or hit him. Salvadoran officers never take their soldiers' opinions into account.

We are militants and people from these communities. Before we got involved in filmmaking, we were involved in different kinds of political work. All this really helps us establish a relation of trust. That's of very great importance. When we come to terms with the fact that it's important to train women to make movies, then that will mean that we get a more significant participation of women in these films and that we represent them better; then the kind of interviews we do would be different, too.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Viewer's Dialectic, part 1

by Tomás Gutierrez Alea

translated by Julia Lesage

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We are pleased to be able to offer our readers a major work of film theory from a socialist country, written by a major filmmaker. The Viewer's Dialectic by Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutierrez Alea will appear in its entirety in JUMP CUT, the first half in this issue and the rest over the next several issues. The work's Cuban publication is in Series "Cuadernos," No. 13 (Havana: Union de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 1982). This translation is available online in *Jump Cut* and in print form from the Center for Cuban Studies, New York. — The Editors

DEDICATION

"The work of art, and similarly any other product, creates a public that's sensitive to art and able to enjoy beauty. Thus producing it doesn't just create an object for a subject, rather it also creates a subject for that object." — Karl Marx, "Introduction," *Critique of Political Economy*

INTRODUCTION

Twenty years after taking power, the revolution has left behind its most spectacular moments. Our shaken land offered then unique, one-time only images, such as that incredible caravan which accompanied Fidel in his entrance to Havana, the bearded men, the palm fronds, and the vertigo of all the transformations that were happening. We saw the traitors and timorous ones leave, the jailors judged, and the enemy's immediate response. On our part, we saw nationalizations and a more radicalized process day after day. Later came the armed confrontations, sabotages, counterrevolution in Escambray, the Bay of Pigs, and the [Missile] Crisis of October.

Those deeds — by themselves and on their very surface — revealed profound changes occurring at a rhythm that could not have been

foreseen. For cinema, it was almost sufficient just to record deeds, seize some fragment directly from reality, and give witness to what was going on in the streets. This image projected on the screen turned out to be interesting, revealing and spectacular.[\(1\)](#)

In that conjuncture and stimulated, or rather pressured by, ever changing reality, Cuban cinema emerged as one more facet of reality within the revolution. Directors learned to make films on the march and played their instruments by ear, like old-time musicians. They interested viewers more by what they showed than through how they showed it. In those first years our filmmaking emphasized documentary. Little by little, through constant practice, it acquired its own physiognomy and dynamism, which has let it stand with renewed force next to older film styles that are more developed but also tired.

All that shapes our history. Our subsequent revolutionary development carries us inevitably toward a process of maturation, of reflection on and analysis of our accumulated experiences.

Our current stage of institutionalization is possible only because it's based on a high degree of political awareness, which our people have reached through years of incessant fighting. But this stage also demands the masses' active, increased participation in building a new society. Increasingly, a greater and greater responsibility falls on the masses. For that reason, we can no longer have the public merely cling enthusiastically and spontaneously to the revolution and its leaders. To the degree that the government passes on its tasks to the people, the masses have to develop ways of understanding problems, strengthening ideological coherence, and reaffirming daily the revolution's animating principles. It's that process which gives the revolution life.

Everyday events proceed now in another way. The image of revolution has become ordinary, familiar. In some ways we're achieving transformations even more profound than earlier ones, but ones that aren't so "apparent" now, not immediately visible to the observer. And these changes or transformations are not so surprising, nor do people respond to them with applause or the same open expression of support. We just don't have those kind of spectacular transformations we did 15 or 20 years ago.

Cuban cinema confronts that new and different way of thinking about what social processes are going to hold for us because our film draws its strength from Cuban reality and assumes, among other things, to express it. Thus we find it no longer sufficient just to take the cameras out in the street and capture fragments of that reality. This can always be a legitimate way of filmmaking, but only when and if the filmmaker knows how to select those aspects which, in close interrelation, offer a *significant* image of reality, which serves the film as both a point of departure and arrival.

The filmmaker is immersed in a complex milieu, the profound significance of which does not lie on the surface. If filmmakers want to

express their world coherently and at the same time respond to the demands their world places on them, they should not go out armed with just a camera and their sensibility but also with solid theoretical criteria. They need to be able to interpret and transmit reality's image richly and authentically.

On the other hand, in moments of relative expansion, capitalism and socialism air their struggle above all ideologically. And on that level, film plays a relevant role both as a mass medium, in terms of diffusion, and as a medium of artistic expression. The level of complexity at which the ideological struggle develops demands that filmmakers completely overcome not only the spontaneity of the first years after the revolutionary triumph, but also the dangers contained within a tendency to schematize. People are in the habit of falling into schematization when they haven't organically assimilated the most advanced tendencies, the most revolutionary ones, and the most in vogue, especially those which speak to the social function which the cinematic spectacle should fulfill. For filmmakers create cultural products which aim at mass diffusion, which manipulate expressive resources that have a certain efficacy. Film not only diverts and informs, it also shapes taste, intellectual criteria, and states of consciousness. If filmmakers fully assume their own social and historical responsibility, they find themselves confronting the inevitable necessity of promoting the theoretical development of their artistic practice.

We understand what cinema's social function should be in Cuba in these times. It should contribute in the most efficient way possible to elevating viewers' revolutionary consciousness and arming them for the entire ideological struggle which we have to carry on against all kinds of reactionary tendencies. It should contribute to the best enjoyment that can be gotten out of life. We want to establish what might be the highest level which film — as spectacle — could reach in fulfilling this function. Thus we ask ourselves to what degree a certain type of spectacle can provoke people's coming to consciousness and their consequent activity. We also wonder what that coming to consciousness consists of and what activity ought to be generated in spectators once they have stopped being such. That is, people leave the movie theater and encounter once again that other reality, their social and individual life, daily life.

Capitalist cinema, reduced to the condition of merchandise, rarely tries to answer these questions. On the other hand (and for other reasons) socialist cinema has not ordinarily fully satisfied that demand. Nevertheless, finding ourselves in the midst of revolution at this particular stage of constructing socialism, we should be able to establish the premises of a cinema which would be genuinely and integrally revolutionary, active, mobilizing, stimulating, and effectively popular.

The expressive possibilities of the film spectacle are inexhaustible. To create with them and fully realize them is a poet's task. But on that point, for the time being, this analysis can go no further. For I am not focusing on film's purely aesthetic aspects, but rather trying to discover

in the relation which film establishes over and over again between spectacle and spectator, the laws which govern this relation and the possibilities within those laws for developing a socially productive spectacle.

(We want to express our gratitude to Professor Zaira Rodriguez and Jorge de la Fuente for their help and stimulating ideas offered during writing this work.)

"POPULAR" FILM AND PEOPLE'S FILM

Among all the arts, film is held to be the most popular. It wasn't always. For a long time, confusion reigned as to whether film was an art or not. That confusion continues because of film's popular character.

Cinema today is still marked by its class origin. During its short history, it has had moments of rebellion, investigation, and authentic achievement in expressing the most revolutionary tendencies. Nevertheless, to a large degree, cinema keeps on being the most natural incarnation of the petit bourgeois spirit which gave it life at its birth almost eighty years ago.

Capitalism was going into its imperialist phase. In principle, the modest invention of an apparatus for the capturing and reproducing of moving images from reality was no more than an ingenious toy for fairs. By means of that toy, spectators could feel themselves carried off to the farthest reaches of the world without moving from their seats. Very soon the toy left the fairground. That does not mean to say that it has achieved a more dignified and respectable *status*: it went on to be developed as a real industry for spectacle.

That industry began mass production of a kind of merchandise able to satisfy the tastes and encourage the aspirations of a society dominated by a bourgeoisie which extended its power into every corner of the world. From the very first moment, two parallel paths were opened up in film. It offered a "true document of certain aspects of reality. On the other hand, it had this fascination for magic. Between those two poles — documentary and fiction — film has always moved. Very soon it became "popular, not in the sense that it was an expression of the *people*, of the sectors most oppressed and most exploited by an alienating system of production. Rather, it could attract an undifferentiated public, a majority avid for illusions.

Perhaps more radically than any other medium of artistic expression, cinema can never leave behind its condition as merchandise. The commercial success it achieved pushed it on to vertiginous development. It was converted into a complex and costly industry. It had to invent all kinds of formulae and recipes so that the spectacle which it offered would gain favor with the broadest public. Numbers of viewers are what cinema depends on for its very subsistence. Surely it was a medium which still could express itself only in baby talk. But more than that, it's cinema's condition as merchandise and its "popular" character that

provoke the resistance which has existed in circles that paid unconditional reverence to "high" art; they have not wanted to elevate cinema to the category of true art. Art and the people didn't get along.

Then some folks thought that cinema, to be art, should translate the master works from universal culture. Thus a lot of pretentious, gilded works were filmed, heavy and theoretical ones which had nothing to do with the emerging film language. Beyond those detours, surely cinema constituted a human activity which was fulfilling better than others a fundamental necessity for enjoyment. In film practice, as it directed itself fundamentally toward that objective, film language began to mature and discover expressive possibilities, which let cinema achieve an aesthetic height, although without proposing that as its goal.

U.S. cinema, with its pragmatic sense, was here the most advanced. It was the most vital and the richest in technical and expressive discoveries. From the first years of this century, it was building distinct genres — comedies, westerns, gangster films, historical super-productions, and melodramas — which rapidly became converted into "classics." That is to say, the genres consolidated themselves into formal models and reached a high level of development; at the same time, they were converted into empty stereotypes. They offered the most effective expression of a culture of the masses, who functioned as passive consumers, as contemplating spectators, as shameless in terms of letting reality not demand action from them. The genres closed down possibilities for action.

Cinema can create genuine ghosts, images of lights and shadows which can't be captured. It's like a shared dream. It has been the major vehicle to encourage viewers' false illusions and serve them as a refuge. It acts as a substitute for that reality which the spectators are kept from developing humanly, and which, as a sort of compensation, it lets them dream about while awake.

Film equipment and the means of film production were invented and created in terms of bourgeois tastes and needs. Film rapidly became the most concrete manifestation of the bourgeois spirit, in objectifying its dreams.

Clearly, for the bourgeoisie, film did not represent an extension of work, nor of school, nor of daily life with its many tensions; it was neither a formal ceremony nor a political discourse. The first thing burdened spectators were looking for in it was gratification and relaxation to fill up their free time. Surely most cinematic production rarely went beyond the most vulgar levels of communicating with its public. The important thing was how much money could be obtained with any product, not the highest artistic quality.

In the 20s the European avant-garde also made its incursion into filmmaking and left a few works in which it explored a vast range of expressive possibilities. But that was a vain attempt to rescue film from the vulgarity to which commercialism has condemned it. It couldn't put

down roots. However, thanks to a few exceptional works, the movement was not completely sterile.

But it wasn't until the creation of Soviet film that the art world began to officially accept the evidence that not just a new language had been born but also a new art. This was because of the theoretical preoccupation of the Soviet directors and the practical support given to the new medium. "Collective art *par excellence*, destined for the masses," it was called then. Soviet cinema attained a real closeness to the movement of radical social transformation in which it was operating. It was a collective art because it combined diverse individuals' experience. And it drew nourishment from artistic practice in other media about how to be a new art, a specifically different art, about which film was definitely self-conscious. It was destined for the masses and popular because it expressed the interests, aspirations, and values of numerous sectors of the population who at that moment were advancing history. That first moment of Soviet filmmaking left profound traces on all filmmaking that followed. Today the most modern filmmaking continues to drink from its fountains and nourish itself from that cinema's explorations, experiments, and theoretical achievements, which still haven't been completely mined.

In the capitalist world, the first years of sound filmmaking coincided with the economic crisis of 1929. Cinema consolidated itself as an audiovisual language and constructed so complicated a production apparatus that for a long time it was not possible to make films on the margins of this great industry nor bypass its interests. In spite of that, in the 30s, the U.S. industry became motivated to produce a few films with a critical vision about society and about the social movement in which people were living. These films maintained all the conventions of an established and filtered language, but they also demonstrated an authentic realism in dealing with important contemporary themes. This cinema, which spoke about social conflicts afflicting everyone, arose at a favorable conjuncture, but very soon detoured towards complacent reformism. Those were the years of the Hays Code, also known as the code of propriety. It was an instrument for censorship and propaganda which responded to the interests of finance capital and which indicated the narrow ideological straits which U.S. cinema would traverse for a long time.[\(2\)](#)

Toward the end of World War II, with wounds still open and under politically favorable circumstances, Italian neo-realist cinema surged forward. With all its political and ideological limitations, it was a living, fecund movement insofar as it went the route of an authentically popular cinema.

In the heat of postwar France, a "new wave" of young directors appeared who threw themselves impetuously into revolutionizing filmmaking without understanding the limits of the petit bourgeois world. Among them, Godard stands out as the great destroyer of bourgeois cinema. Taking Brecht as his point of departure — and the New Left as his point

of arrival — he tried to make revolution from the screen. His genius, inventiveness, imagination, and clumsy aggressiveness give him a privileged place among the "doomed" filmmakers. He achieved making anti-bourgeois cinema but he couldn't make people's cinema. Noteworthy drones like Jean-Marie Straub, admirable for his almost religious asceticism, have already institutionalized that position. Some think they are making a revolution in the superstructure without needing to move the base.

Another phenomenon inscribed in those searches for a revolutionary filmmaking practice is the cinema called "parallel" or "marginal" or "alternative." This has arisen in the last few years due to the development of technology and equipment which permit the production of relatively cheap films. It's within the reach of small, independent groups and of revolutionary militants. In this cinema, revolutionary ideology is openly put forth. It's a political cinema which can serve to mobilize the masses and channel them toward revolution. As a revolutionary practice it has been efficient within the narrow limits in which it operates. But it cannot reach large numbers, not only because of the political obstacles it encounters within the distribution and exhibition system, but also for how it's made. Most people continue to prefer the most polished product which the great spectacle industry offers them.

In the capitalist world — and in a good part of the socialist world — the public is conditioned by specific conventions of film language, by formulae and genres which are those of bourgeois commercial filmmaking. This occurs so much that we can say that cinema, as a product originating from the bourgeoisie, almost always has responded better to capitalism's interests than to socialism's, to bourgeois interests more than to proletarian ones, to a consumer society's interests more than to a revolutionary society's interests, to alienation more than to non-alienation, to hypocrisy and lies more than to the profound truth.

People's cinema, in spite of its many notable exponents and few exceptional phenomena, has not always been able fully to combine revolutionary ideology with mass appeal. On our part, we cannot accept simple numerical criteria to determine the essence of a people's cinema. Clearly, finally when we speak about the *great* masses of people, we have to refer to the whole community. But such a criterion is so broad and so vague that it becomes impossible to introduce any kind of value judgment into it. The number of people in a country or in a certain section of a country is no more than the coincidence of people who, looked at like that, abstractly, lack any kind of significance.

If we want to set up some kind of concrete criterion about what *popular* means, it's necessary to know what those people situated in that place represent, not just in terms of geographical location, but rather in terms of their historical moment and as a specific class. It's necessary to distinguish in that broad confluence which groups — the great masses — best incarnate, consciously or unconsciously, the lines of force which

will be those of historical development. That is to say, which are moving towards the *incessant betterment of living conditions on this planet*? And if the criterion for determining "popular" accepts as its base line that distinction, we can say that its essence resides in what would be the *best* thing for *those* grand masses, that which best responds to their most vital interests.

Surely, immediate interests sometimes obliterate the midrange ones, and you may often lose view of your final objectives. To be more precise: the popular ought to respond not only to immediate interests (expressed in the need to enjoy yourself, to play, to abandon yourself to the moment or illusion, to get out of your own skin) but also basic needs and the final objective: transforming reality and bettering humankind. From this point on, when I speak about popular film, I am not referring to cinema which is simply accepted by the community, but rather to a cinema which also expresses the people's most profound and authentic interests and responds to those interests. In accordance with this criterion (and we must keep in mind that in a class society, cinema can't stop being an instrument of the dominant class), an authentically popular cinema can be fully developed only in a society where the people's interests coincide with the state's interests. That is, in a socialist society.

During the construction of socialism, the proletariat has not disappeared as a class which exercises its power through a complex state apparatus. Differences continue between city and country life, and between intellectual and physical work. Mercantile relations have not yet disappeared, and along with them certain manifestations — conscious or unconscious — of bourgeois ideology (or what is even worse, petit bourgeois ideology). Still we have only an insufficient material base to depend on. Above all, imperialism continues to exist in the world.

During this time, art's social function acquires very specific shadings in accordance with our most urgent needs and objectives. It responds to the most immediate tasks people set for themselves when they are feeling owners of their destiny and are working to accomplish it.⁽³⁾ Here art's function is to contribute to the best enjoyment of life, at the aesthetic level. It does this not by offering a ludicrous parenthesis in the middle of everyday reality but by enriching that very reality. At the cognitive level, it contributes to a more profound comprehension of the world. This helps viewers develop criteria congruent with the path that society has traversed. At the ideological level, finally, art also contributes to reaffirming the new society's values and thus to fight for its preservation and development. Given that at this stage, the ideological level has primacy, art's efficacy here stands in direct relation to its aesthetic and cognitive efficacy.

I will try to establish which approaches might be most appropriate for cinema, as one of art's specific manifestations, so that it can move toward those objectives.

FROM SPECTACLE IN ITS PUREST SENSE

TO THE "CINEMA OF IDEAS"

As with literature, film has proceeded to establish certain basic genres according to the expressive needs of each specific material. In the same way that we have journalism — magazines and newspapers — fictional literature and essays, with all their variety and shadings, all their own resources and characteristics, in film we have newscasts, short films, and feature films. Superficially we can point out affinities between newscasts and daily journalism, between short films and certain kinds of articles and reports, which usually appear in magazines; and between feature films and fictional literature, especially novels, or, and we see this more and more, the long essay. But these similarities are pretty obvious at first glance. Of more interest is to define some basic cinematic generic peculiarities and to underline the fact that, as also happens in literature, this division is conventional. The frontiers which separate genres do not hinder the interchange of expressive resources and even of specific elements between genres.

Newscasts offer primarily direct reportage on contemporary events. Certain events with a specific significance are selected by the camera and projected on the screen to inform us about what's happening in the world. You usually do not receive a profound analysis of these events' significance, but because of their very selection and form of presentation, political criteria are manifest and so is, obviously, ideology. First of all, because of the emphasis on information, the newscast operates with material very limited in time span. Nevertheless, and at second glance, these newscasts constitute a body of material that is testimony to an epoch, the importance of which is not always predictable. That is, these newscasts can acquire a growing historical value and constitute the prime materials for a later analytic re-elaboration. Such a double function turns the newsreel into a most important political instrument. The emphasis here lies in its political (ideological) and cognitive aspects. The aesthetic aspect is subordinate to them, which isn't to say that it doesn't exist or can't — or shouldn't — play a decisive role in deciding the greater or lesser efficacy of the other two aspects.

The short subject offers more variants. It can be a primarily informative report. It can be a documentary where the deeds brought to the screen — either in image or sound — were not captured directly from a real-life event but rather were creatively elaborated by the director. The intent would be to select out from an undifferentiated surface those actions that had a more profound significance, which would be manipulated in the film in terms of an analytic objective. Here the cognitive aspect takes primacy. Also, the short film includes fictional works — little cinematic poems, the narration of a short story, etc. It's generally 20-40 minutes long. That length presupposes a more elaborated structure than the newsreel has and more complexity in treating a theme. Consequently the form allows the filmmaker to go into greater depth — both in terms of information and analysis. Thus, its operation — its transcendence — is broader, and the aesthetic aspect here usually plays a certain

determinant and relevant role.

The feature film is generally fiction. The plots are completely fabricated, according to a preconceived idea, and developed on the basis of dramatic principles. All this corresponds to an established convention, which can be either a support or hindrance for the best and most coherent concretizing of that idea which was the point of departure.

On the other hand, in Cuba we have extensively developed a type of feature-length documentary in which events are recreated or shown as they could have been had the camera captured them directly at the moment of their occurrence. Then these actions are arranged in such a way that they function as elements of a complex structure, through which the film can offer a more profound analysis of some aspect of reality. In addition, news reportage can get to be feature length, but that structure is used infrequently. Generally then certain exceptionally important events are registered on film and ordered in chronological order or some other way so as to facilitate viewers' better understanding of them.

Normal theatrical programming in general is composed of a newsreel, a documentary or short, and a fiction feature. Thus the basic genres, distinct but complementary, get seen at one sitting. Here viewers can experience *distinct levels of mediation, which bring them closer to or farther away from reality* and which can offer them a better understanding of those levels of mediation. This play of approximations, produced through seeing distinct genres at one screening, doesn't always have the greatest coherence or reach the greatest level of "productivity," because viewers then usually are seeing works made independently of each other which exhibitionists found a way to tie together only later on. Nevertheless, this possibility of mutual relations throws light on what could be achieved here, even if we are considering just *the framework of a single film*, in the elaboration of which the filmmaker has kept in mind this whole broad range of *levels of approximating reality*.

I want to focus on that genre which best corresponds to the concept of "spectacle" and which constitutes the basic product in any cinema: the feature fiction film.

First, I want to consider and put aside a very specific genre: educational film. Here, even when it's operating with the same elements and resources as film-spectacles, these films are organized in terms of a special function: to complement, amplify, or illustrate in a direct manner classroom teaching. It's like a textbook but doesn't substitute for it. A student's attitude vis-à-vis educational film is radically different from the spectator's confronting spectacle film. Demanded of students is a conscious effort, one directed toward acquiring a specific understanding. In contrast, spectators go to spectacle so as to fill up their free time — to relax, seek diversion and entertainment, and get pleasure. And if these viewers do get out of a film some kind of conscious understanding, it's of another order. That isn't the spectator's

primary motivation.

Without going beyond the framework of spectacle film, and more specifically fictional film, we can find distinct possibilities in the emphasis, according to the film's condition as a spectacle or as a vehicle of ideas. We must have in mind, of course, that always, to some degree, spectacle remains a bearer of ideology.

There's a superficial interpretation of how film (or art in general) should function in our society. This notion proposes doling out aesthetic enjoyment while you are at the same time "raising the people's cultural level." Over and over, such a vulgar stand has led some to promote additive formulae in which "social" *content* (understood as an educational aspect, forming revolutionary consciousness but also sometimes just diffusing political slogans) should be introduced in an attractive *form*. That is, the "message" ought to be decked out and confectioned in such a way that it's agreeable to the consumer palate. Something like that would produce a sort of ideological pap for easy digestion.

Obviously, it's only a simplistic solution to consider form and content as two separate ingredients, which you can mix in apt proportion, according to some ideal recipe. Furthermore, this attitude considers the spectator as a passive entity. Such a perspective can only lead to bureaucratizing artistic activity. It does not have anything to do with a dialectical understanding of the process of an organic integration of form and content, in which both aspects are seen to be indissolubly united at the same time that they work off of and interpenetrate each other, even to the point where they take over each other's functions in that reciprocal interplay. That is, we're dealing with a complex and rich process of contradictions and possibilities for development, in which the formal, aesthetic, and emotional aspects, on the one hand, and the thematic, educational, and rational aspects, on the other, reveal certain affinities but also their own peculiarities. The diverse modalities of their mutual interaction (to the degree to which that interaction is organic, following upon the premises which generate the text) give rise to various levels of "productivity" (in terms of functionality, effectiveness, and fulfillment of assigned functions) in the work's relation to the spectator.

Later I will offer some considerations about the relation between the cinematic spectacle and its spectator, and try to trace out certain mechanisms which that relation rests on. For now I only wish to point out that those distinct levels of productivity — or levels of potential functionality, which derive primarily from the manner in which the emphasis is distributed among aesthetic, cognitive, and ideological aspects — *are not exclusive levels*. That is to say, fiction film is basically spectacle. Its function as spectacle, in the purest sense, is to entertain, distract, and offer an enjoyment that comes from representation. Represented are actions, situations and diverse things which have as their point of departure reality — in its broadest sense. These things constitute a fiction, another distinctly new reality. And that can enrich

or impoverish the reality which has been already established or known up to this point.

A simple spectacle is healthy to the degree that it does not obstruct viewers' spiritual development. However, a class-society spectacle's spirit of recreation must somehow reinforce established values, whatever those might be. That's because these values broadly function as an escape valve to let people avoid confronting those problems and tensions which real social conflicts are generating. At this level, the social and moral accent always falls back on emotion in general. Thus spectacle, in its purest sense, just seeks to generate emotions in the spectator and to dole out a sensory pleasure, as, let's say, a sports event does. We should not mistrust this pleasure, except when lightness goes beyond that into stupidity, when happiness becomes frivolity, when healthy eroticism becomes pornography — and when, under the guise of simple entertainment, spectacle becomes converted into a vehicle for affirming all bourgeois cultural traits. Then — consciously or unconsciously — it incarnates bourgeois ideology. That is, even "entertainment" films which apparently "say nothing" and are seemingly simple objects of consumption, those films could also fulfill the elemental function of spiritually enriching the spectator if they did not, to use a coined expression, promote "ideological deviationism." Consumption does not — and should not — have the same meaning in a capitalist society that it would in a socialist one.

But if we want to go further, if we want film to serve something higher (or do the same thing, but do it more profoundly), if we want it to fulfill its function more perfectly (aesthetic, social, ethical, and revolutionary), we ought to guarantee that it constitutes *a factor in spectators' development*. Film will be more fruitful to the degree that it pushes spectators toward a more profound understanding of reality and, consequently, to the degree that it helps viewers live more actively and incites them to stop being mere spectators in the face of reality. To do this, film ought to appeal not only to emotion and feeling but also to reason and intellect. In this case, both instances ought to exist indissolubly united, in such a way that they come to provoke, as Pascal said, authentic "shudderings and tremblings of the mind."

Thus, we don't have a case of any old emotion to which you can add a dose of reason, ideas, or "content." Rather it's emotion tied to the *discovery* of something, to the rational comprehension of some aspect of reality. Such emotion is qualitatively distinct from that which a simple spectacle will elicit (*suspense*, the chases, terror, sentimental situations, etc.) although it might well be reinforced or impeded by those.

On the other hand, it's good to remember that cinema, in the well-intentioned process of shaping its objectives to aptly fulfill its social function, can neglect its function as spectacle. If it appeals exclusively to reason or to the viewers' intellectual efforts, it noticeably reduces its efficacy because it is forgetting one of its essential aspects, pleasure.

Art expresses its development not only in a successive change in

function, according to the distinct social formations which generate art across history. Rather we also see an enrichment and a greater complexity of the resources which art has at its disposal. From the magician cave artist to the artist of the scientific era, the art object has taken on diverse functions. Successively, it has had the function of being an instrument to dominate natural forces, of one class dominating another, of affirming an idea, of communicating, of knowing one's self, of developing a critical consciousness, of celebration, of evading reality, of compensating, or of simple aesthetic pleasure. Every historical moment places an accent on one or another of these functions and denies others. Nevertheless, we must not forget that all of these functions form one body of accumulated experience, and out of all of them, some valuable element endures which will enrich the others. The various levels of comprehension (or of interpretation) of an artistic work become juxtaposed and express art's accumulation of multiple functions across history. Thus, the cave artist persists in all real art, and if he was never effective enough to attract real bison, certainly he was able to mobilize the hunters. Suggestion continues to operate with greater or lesser success, according to the specific circumstances of each particular work. That's how so many artistic works operate when they prefigure victory over an enemy or exalt a warrior's heroism. But the course of history has given us another type of artist who works as well through reason, through understanding and who, in specific circumstances, fully attains his or her objective. The various functions which art has fulfilled have enriched artistic activity with new expressive resources. The magnificent arsenal of resources accumulated across history which contemporary art has at its disposition permits it to exercise its functions at all levels of comprehension, suggestion and enjoyment.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Viewer's Dialectic, page 2

by Tomás Gutierrez Alea

translated by Julia Lesage

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SPECTACLE AND REALITY:

THE EXTRAORDINARY AND THE EVERYDAY

There are some films which you can usually see on TV which mature spectators may feel uncomfortable with and find meaningless because they cannot coherently relate the films to the complex images of the world which they have formed during their life. Such people may well ask, "What does this have to do with reality?" To which a child might answer with another question, "Well, isn't it just a movie?" The questions stay in pure air, of course. It would be a hard task to explain to a child how, for mature people, the sphere of reality is constantly articulated in more detail in one's mind, and how some things are left behind. It happens in such a way that an adult's image of the world comes to be very different from what a child can imagine.

Mature adults keep separating out more or less apparent layers of reality, so that they draw closer and closer to its essence. They discriminate and valorize reality's distinct aspects as a consequence of human understanding, which becomes more and more profound about reality itself. That's why a mature person probably feels dissatisfied confronting some movies. But it's also why the child's question doesn't allow for a quick, superficial response.

Certainly a film is one thing and reality is another. We can't forget that those are the rules of the game. Of course, film and reality are not — cannot be — completely divorced from each other. A film forms part of reality. Like all works which people inscribe in art, film is a manifestation of social consciousness and also constitutes a reflection of reality.

In relation to cinema, one circumstance of its production can be deceptive. The signs which cinematic language employs are no more than images of separate aspects of reality itself. It's not just a question of colors, lines, sounds, textures and forms, but also of objects, persons, situations, gestures, and ways of speaking. In this way, freed from their habitual connotations and daily use, they are charged with a new

significance within the context of the fiction. Film thus captures images of isolated aspects of reality. It's not a simple, mechanical copy. It does not capture reality itself, in all its breadth and depth.

But cinema can reach a higher degree of profundity and generalization, because of the possibility of finding new relations among those images of isolated aspects. Those aspects thus take on new meaning, a meaning not completely alien to them, yet one that can be more profound and more revealing. Film can relate aspects of reality to other aspects and produce surprises or kinds of associations which in daily reality were diluted and opaque because of their high degree of complexity and because people were saturated with seeing such things in their daily life. Thus we find the potential for a revealing operation, destined to raise the level of film's complexity and richness but which is a potential still in growth. It is a potential specific to film, because we're talking about a film language which is nourished by reality and reflects it on the basis of images of objects which are offered up to sight and sound, as if we were dealing with a huge ordering and selecting mirror. Such a way of looking at reality *through* fiction offers spectators the possibility of appreciating, enjoying, and understanding reality better.

But that should not confuse us. Cinematic realism, in its present capacity, cannot capture reality just like it is" (which becomes only "just like it *appears* to be"). Rather it does have the capacity to reveal, through associations and through relating diverse aspects pulled out from daily reality — that is to say, through creating a "new reality." In this way, it can reveal deeper, more essential layers of reality itself. It can do it in a way that lets us establish a difference between that objective reality which the world offers us — life in its broadest sense — and the image of reality which cinema offers us within the narrow frame of the screen. One would be genuine *reality*; the other, *fiction*.

Now I'd like to elaborate how the cinematic spectacle offers viewers an image of reality which belongs to the sphere of fiction, the imaginary, and the unreal. In this sense, it stands in relative opposition to the very reality within which it is inserted. Clearly, the sphere of the real, in its broadest sense, includes social life and all cultural manifestations. It also encompasses the sphere of fiction, of spectacle — as cultural objects. But, to be rigorous, it's really a question of two diverse spheres, each with its own peculiarities, describable not just as two aspects of reality, but also as two moments in the process of approximating reality's essence. Spectacle thus can be conceived as mediation in the process of penetrating into reality. The moment of the spectacle corresponds to the moment of abstraction in the process of understanding.

The artistic spectacle becomes inserted into the sphere of *everyday* reality (the sphere of what is continuously stable and relatively calm) as an *extraordinary* moment, as a rupture. It's opposed to daily life as an unreality, an other-reality, insofar as it moves and relates to the spectator on an *ideal* plane. (In this being ideal — strange as opposed to

the daily or the normative — it expresses its unusual and extraordinary character. It's not that spectacle is opposed to the typical, but rather it can incarnate the typical in that it is a selective process which exacerbates relevant — signifying — traits from reality.)

We can't say, however, that cinema is an extension of (daily) reality but rather is always an extension of (the artists' and the viewers') subjective reality to the degree that it objectifies people's ideological and emotional process. Cinema can draw viewers closer to reality without giving up its condition of unreality, fiction, and other-reality. This happens when and if it lays down a bridge to reality so that viewers can return laden with experiences and stimulation. All the experiences, information, and liveliness which viewers gain on the basis of this relation may remain just on that level — one which may be more or less active in term of reflection, the sensory level.

But film can also initiate in viewers, once they've stopped being viewers and are facing that other aspect of reality (the viewers' own life, their daily reality), a series of thinking processes, reasonings, judgments, ideas and thus a better comprehension of reality itself and a more adequate way of conducting themselves, of acting practically. The spectator's response which follows the moment of the spectacle is an effect of the spectacle.[\(4\)](#)

The most socially productive spectacle surely cannot be one which limits itself to a more or less precise ("honest," servile) reflection of reality just as reality offers itself in its immediacy. That would do no more than duplicate the image we already have of reality. It'd be redundant, a kind of summing up lacking meaning. We could hardly tell that it was a spectacle. The spectacle proper (that is, the one that manifests itself through what we call *fiction*) asserts itself as a moment of rupture and as a kind of strong emotion in the midst of daily reality, and in this sense opposed to it and negating it. We must establish very clearly what this *negation* of reality ought to consist of so that it becomes socially productive.

There's a story of a painter, a Chinese painter for all we know, who once painted a beautiful landscape in which you could see mountains, rivers, trees. They were executed with so much elegance, so congruent with the imagination which dictated them, that all a viewer needed was to hear the birds' songs and feel the wind pass between the trees to complete the illusion of standing in front of a real landscape and not a picture. The painter, once finished, stood there contemplating the landscape which had sprung from his head and hands. He was in such ecstasy that he began to walk toward the picture and feel completely surrounded by the landscape. He walked among the trees, followed the course of the river, and withdrew more and more in the mountains until he disappeared toward the horizon.

A great exit for an artist probably. But similar experiences of aesthetic ecstasy for any viewers ought to be conditioned so that the viewers do not lose their way back, and so that they can return to reality spiritually

enriched and stimulated to live better in it. For that reason, whatever the landscape of the Chinese painter offers with all of its mysterious charm, it represents the absolute negation of reality and thus (maintaining ourselves on the plane of metaphor) death or insanity.

A spectacle which exercises this kind of fascination for the spectator can be characterized as a "metaphysical negation" of reality. That is, it's a negation which tries to abolish reality through the act of evading it. Of course, that would not be the most socially productive kind of spectacle.

But for a long time, that's been the ideal of spectacle for a class which is essentially hypocritical and impotent, but which has been capable of inventing the most sophisticated mechanisms for justifying itself. It tries to hide from itself the most profound levels of reality which it cannot — or does not — want to change. But that's not the case in a society which is constructing itself on a new basis, which proposes to eliminate all vestiges of human exploitation, which demands all its members' active participation and thus each person's developing a social conscience. Here metaphysical negation, which tries to abolish reality through an act of negation, is precisely opposed to dialectical negation, which aims to transform reality through revolutionary practice. As Engels said,

"To negate, in dialectics, doesn't consist just of calmly and smoothly saying, 'No,' in saying that a thing doesn't exist, or in capriciously destroying it."

Further on he says,

"Every class of things has, therefore, its own particular mode of being negated, in such a way that it engenders a process of development. And the same occurs with ideas and concepts."
(*Anti-Dühring*)

In this way, *a spectacle which is socially productive* will be that which negates daily reality (the false values crystallized in daily or ordinary thought) and at the same time feels the premises of its own negation. That is, it negates being a substitute for reality or an object of contemplation. It can't just offer itself as a simple way out or consolation for a burdened spectator. Rather it must aid the viewers' return from the other reality — the one which pushed them momentarily to relate themselves to the spectacle, to distract themselves, to play. They should not return complacent, tranquil, empty, worn out, and inert. Rather the viewer should be stimulated and armed for practical action. This means spectacle must constitute a factor in the development, through enjoyment, of the spectators' consciousness. In doing that, it moves them to stop being simple, passive (contemplative) spectators in the face of reality.

Notes

1. Patricio Guzman in notes he wrote before making BATTLE OF CHILE, said at that time — the months preceding the fascist coup — he'd

never have made a fictional film with actors reciting a text, because reality itself, which was developing before their very eyes, was changing tremendously. At those moments of social convulsion, reality lost its "daily" character, and everything which happened was "extraordinary," new, unique. The dynamics of the change, the tendencies of that development, the very essence of it, were manifested most directly and clearly in moments of relative quiet. For that reason, it captured our attention, and in that sense we can say it is spectacular. Surely the most effective thing at that time was to try to capture those moments in their purest state: documentary. Leave for re-elaboration elements from those moments in which reality seems to be proceeding without any apparent alteration or change. Then fiction becomes a fit instrument for penetrating into reality's essence.

2. This famous code demanded, amongst other things, that film ought to

"shape characters, develop an ideal and inculcate just principles, by using attractive incidents and offering to the spectators' admiration fine examples of good conduct."

Independently of any discrepancy from "ideal" and "just" principles which this revealing document was trying to promote, it is interesting for us to see how it resorts to the most puerile mechanism — posing that spectators admire "fine examples of good conduct". Without a doubt, that mechanism best hides reactionary attitudes, because it only aims at creating an idealized image complacent about reality.

3. In the thesis about artistic and literary culture contained in the *Platform and Program of the Cuban Communist Party*, we can read,

"Socialist society demands an art and literature which, at the same time that it provides aesthetic enjoyment, contributes to raising the whole people's cultural level. It ought to create a climate which is extremely creative, which impels art and literature's progress as the legitimate aspiration of working people. Art and literature will promote the highest human values, enrich our people's lives, and participate actively in forming the communist person."

4. Certainly TV has brought into homes the most spectacular images of reality; for example, I think about the middle class U.S. viewer drinking beer while seeing on television how the Saigon chief of police opened a hole in a prisoner's head in full public view; all of that was presented in color. Already the *representation* of those moments has to adjust itself to new circumstances. But the most important thing is that an act is so potent, so unusual, so bloodthirsty, once it's presented as spectacle — that is to say once it is offered up to the spectator's contemplation — it's found to have notably reduced potency as a generator of a consequent reaction on the practical plane. Probably, surprise would make viewers jump from their chairs, but following that, they'd go to the refrigerator to open up another beer, which would make them sleep tranquilly. After all, those deeds have passed little by little into the plane of everydayness.

What would we have to do to move this viewer? It's not enough that the spectacle be real — and that it might be happening at the very moment that one looks at it — so as to generate a productive reaction in the spectator. For that it will be necessary, possibly, to acquire more sophisticated mechanisms.

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Interview with Pastor Vega Havana Film Festival

by Sérvulo Siqueira

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In its first three years of existence, the International Festival of the Latin American Cinema in Havana has become one of the most important cinematographic expositions on the continent. Every film which proposes in any way a new vision of Latin America finds space.

According to Pastor Vega, the festival's director, every film shown must be related to the problems of the country in which it was produced, be linked to its national culture, and pursue an authentic expression of its society, and its people. Since all such films are shown and discussed, such a criterion has made possible the exhibition of almost 1,000 films in three years, with a great predominance of short documentary films.

During two weeks of intense, simultaneous activity in December, films are shown in competition and in parallel showings in the New Latin American Film Market, which specially addresses exhibitors and distributors. Special rooms are set aside for showing videocassettes and seminars and debates consider the most important Latin American cultural and cinematographic issues. Also independent North American cinema finds a receptive public; thus prizes last year went to *EL SALVADOR*, *ANOTHER VIETNAM*, directed by Glenn Silber and Teté Vasconcellos, and *EL ALAMBRISTA*, by Robert Young.

A true barometer of the continent's social and cultural questions, the Festival has focused on Central American cinema and has sessions which show the emergent force of the new styles of Peruvian, Venezuelan, Panamanian, and Chicano cinema. Last year the festival extended its cultural focus to a poster competition and now to Super 8 film, the use of which film format has been extraordinarily large in Latin America in the last years.

This interview is with Pastor Vega, who directed the film *PORTRAIT OF TERESA*, and is director of the Havana Film Festival. Speaking to me in December, 1982, he evaluated the festival's past three years. He discussed Cuban cinema's new perspectives and pointed to the most important objective of the event. Through the window of authentic

cinema the Festival seeks to establish a space in which "to strengthen a Latin American presence and to discuss Latin American social and cultural problems more than they've been discussed in the rest of the world."

Siqueira: Tell how the idea was born to create a film festival in Havana for all of Latin American film.

Vega: New Latin American cinema arose in the 50s in many countries — in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, etc. At first the movement in the various countries was not connected. The Cubans didn't know what was going on in Brazil; the Brazilians didn't know what was going on in Chile; the Chileans weren't aware of what was happening in Bolivia. We did not have links among us.

Only in 1967, ten or fifteen years after this movement began, was the Viña del Mar Festival held in Chile, and it produced an enormous explosion because we all gathered together for the first time. Throughout all these years the Latin American filmmakers only had met each other in European festivals or on occasional trips. At the Viña del Mar Festival in 1967 we could see in a condensed way all the important film work from many countries. In the measure that we discovered ourselves, we could unite. We met again there in 1969, but for economical and political reasons, we could not continue.

Later, through Mérida University in Venezuela, the so-called University of the Andes, we filmmakers tried to continue to meet the need of having a gathering place for Latin American cinemas to see the films produced on the whole continent. Sometimes we had a meeting or a small festival, but we could not continue that tradition born in Viña del Mar. We needed a place where we could discuss our problems — the Cubans with the Brazilians, the Argentines with the Bolivians, the Chileans with the other New Latin American filmmakers, etc.. So much time had passed since the last meetings and festivals that ICAIC decided to organize the Festival of the New Latin American Cinema in Havana.

The first festival was organized here in 1979 and seemed like an explosion. More than 500 filmmakers came. We showed more than 300 films. Practically speaking, it was not a festival but a catharsis — a Latin American cinematographic catharsis. The results stimulated all of us.

We found out many things. Our movement had an enormous force. We had many questions to solve and an urgent need to catapult the new Latin American cinema into the world. Although there was great interest in our work elsewhere, at the same time it was an extremely unknown movement because it was not distributed throughout the world.

Now, in a positive way, North Americans, Western Europeans, socialist countries, and even Australians come here, so that the event becomes a key element in our cinema's greater distribution in the rest of the world. Just this one basic function, so necessary to develop our work, has

already fulfilled part of the Festival's task.

Here we organize the New Latin American Cinema Market to which international buyers come as well as exhibitors and distributors, who find here practically everything new filmed in Latin America. They watch films, and contact directors, distributors, and critics. They establish a coherent network of contacts. From this improved interchange and communication, the development of film work has also greatly improved. I believe such meetings will stimulate the production of new films and the theoretical clarification of many issues.

This will happen because in addition to the Festival, we have seminars, theoretical discussions, and analyses after film showings. Since so many filmmakers meet here, we can talk about our mutual problems. Many duties are coordinated among us during the event. The Festival offers a meeting place and a time for coordination, analysis, promotion and distribution. We have tried to fulfill a whole series of needs and gaps. This has allowed the Festival to be promoted and strengthened and to mature and develop.

In fact, the Festival has grown so much that you need to choose what you are going to do and cannot participate in all of the events — the participant needs to specialize. This year, we extended the event to film's graphic side — posters and advertising. Even advertising is part of the Festival's aims, since we must research new ways to promote our films.

In December 1983 we will enlarge the Super 8 competition. In many countries, especially Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico and Colombia, Super 8 films have great force, and those countries have showings in which many important works are exhibited. In preparing for 1983, in 1982 we organized a special showing of Super 8 films from Venezuela. In the future we will have a new competition for Super 8 films from throughout Latin America. We will invite judges for the Super 8 contest and award prizes so as to incorporate these films into the active life of the Festival and to exhibit Super 8 work from all over the continent.

The Festival must attempt to solve some of the most urgent issues related to the clarification of ideas, especially to establish a better knowledge of our continent's reality in the rest of the world. Our objective is to strengthen the presence of Latin America, its culture and existence, so that this continent might have increased international respect. Our continent has been forgotten and ignored for a long time, but the last 20 years' political struggles have permitted an internationally broader knowledge of the Latin American situation. Also our filmmakers must face this duty in their artistic activity. Certainly the Festival must serve these objectives.

Siqueira: I would like you to speak about the structure of the Festival and how it has made the selection of the films which participate in the competition.

Vega: The Festival is characterized by the fact that we share the same

problems with other Latin American countries, despite the fact that Cuba has its own social system. This festival is not put on by a rich nation.

As a matter of principle, we accept any film that might be classified as a product of the new Latin American cinema, according to the criteria I mentioned before. This is all we demand. We do not want to promote cinema which puts consciousness to sleep, dulls awareness, or limits communication.

On the other hand, unlike other festivals, we cannot invite many people, sending airplane tickets and paying expenses. Ninety per cent of the participants pay their way. But we do try to make those expenses the minimum possible. We don't want to obtain profits through the Festival but cannot exceed our financial capabilities. So we try to establish some sort of compromise, where each one can give a little bit of her/himself to contribute to the event's success.

In our first festival, more than 500 filmmakers came. We didn't have time to organize the second one well because it came only 10 months after the first one, so only 250 filmmakers came. This year more than 300 filmmakers came. Oddly, we had thought we might not do it as an annual event because film production might not be so high and also for economic reasons. But reality has demonstrated the contrary. Latin American film production is high, and the filmmakers feel they need to participate despite the adverse conditions they face.

Siqueira: Could you analyze the cultural, social and cinematographic tendencies that these festivals have expressed? I noticed in the last festival, for example, there were many films about Nicaragua and El Salvador. I believe this reflects cinema's desire to be part of this process.

Vega: Certainly filmmaking participates in national liberation movements. This is generally characteristic of the new Latin American cinema, which seeks to express the truest historical process of its people. Also this cinema has a Latin American viewpoint. We see ourselves as a betrayed people but also as a single nation — with several cultures and historical situations but with the same desire to exist authentically and with the same enemies blocking this as a possibility.

Our cinema calls for continental unity because although we are each culturally distinct, we have deep similarities. For example, Cuba and Brazil have the same roots. Our national cultures have an infinity of common points. We share with the other countries the same language and similar historical processes. We contemplate ourselves in the same way as Bolivar, Juarez and Sandino — the great leaders of our liberation movements in the past — liked to do, as a single nation and an undivided people. Thus, this Festival reflects our concern for national liberation, now concentrated in Central America in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Nicaragua's filmmaking was born during the time of the first festival. It's

filmmaking created inside Nicaragua's war of liberation and participating in it. In the second festival, the first and most authentic cinema from El Salvador erupted. And in the third festival, both the cinemas from Nicaragua and revolutionary El Salvador continued their process of consolidation, showing films full of a variety and force never seen before.

Siqueira: Tell me how you see the Cuban cinema now. Unfortunately, I think the Cuban cinema is still very much unknown even in Latin America.

Vega: This year we celebrated the 23rd anniversary of our cinema. We already have three generations of filmmakers. I belong to the second generation. We used to like to consider ourselves a young film practice, but we are no longer so young. There are other cinemas younger — from Panama, Puerto Rico, Nicaragua, and the Chicano filmmakers. The technical, material and spiritual conditions needed to establish a certain degree of maturity are already accomplished here. By 1983 we should see a great transformation in terms of the amount and the quality of our films, especially since we are transforming and modernizing our industry's technological structure. Twenty years ago we had to interrupt this process because of our economic situation, the U.S. blockade, and a lack of currency to buy equipment abroad. Film equipment is increasingly sophisticated and more and more expensive and we have to buy it because we don't produce it. But now we are modernizing.

Right now, we make between six and seven feature films and over fifty documentary films per year. Next year, we will practically double this, so as to incorporate our new generation of filmmakers who have already made many documentary films and must start to make 23 features.

This confrontation of three generations, receiving the heritage of multiple visions and dealing with them, together with the modernizing of the industry will create a qualitative as well as a quantitative jump. 1983 will be an extremely interesting year for Cuban cinema.

I myself have just finished a screenplay, which extends the theme of PORTRAIT OF TERESA. I want to continue to explore changes in the Cuban people's behavior and emotions within the field of the family relations. New conflicts are already appearing in our society in conjunction with new historical situations. All of this has changed our awareness or at least has created a need to modify our consciousness and revise our attitudes and feelings. It is this world that I would like to keep exploring and reflecting.

Mexican Cinema Of *churros* and *charros*

by John Mraz

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Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1980*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. 287 pp. \$29.95.

Beatriz Reyes Nevares, *The Mexican Cinema: Interviews with Thirteen Directors*. Translated by Carl J. Mora and Elizabeth Gard. Introduction by E. Bradford Burns. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976. 176 pp.

The Mexicans have a word for it — *churro*. A *churro* is any piece of work hastily and poorly done, but Mexicans use the word most often to describe the endless stream of wretched movies turned out by an abysmally commercial cinema. Thus, it has come to mean a film produced for little money (except in the case of the great national *churros*, such as CAMPANAS ROJAS, discussed below), less time, and no imagination — purely for the “fast buck.” Mexican Cinema has so dominated by *churros* (sometimes about *charros*, the Mexican cowboys) that observers from other cultures have rarely found little else to remark on. That, however, is not a comment just about the poor quality of Mexican commercial cinema. It also tells us something about the “otherness” of Mexico.

The otherness of Mexico is sometimes difficult to see from a U.S. perspective. U.S. commodities and popular culture have penetrated everywhere to such a degree that Mexico sometimes looks like an unintentional parody of the U.S. to us. Maybe that's why I laughed at the first Mexican film I saw. Along with a good many others, I chuckled derisively at what is one of *the* Mexican classics, MARÍA CANDELARIA (dir. Emilio Fernández, 1943). Most of the rest of the audience just left. In my Mexican history class, with the air alive with struggle, we all saw ourselves as proper “Third Worlders.” Immersed in polemics about imperialism and neocolonialism, we could easily follow the didacticism of THE HOUR OF THE FURNACES. Weaned on the rapid-fire form of

U.S. television advertising, we could appreciate the dramatic juxtaposition of Santiago Alvarez's Cuban documentaries. Introduced to the murals of Rivera, Siquieros, and Orozco, we could perceive the great revolutionary themes in their work. But, even in one of its finest examples, Mexican commercial cinema just seemed too strange and too distant for us.

It is ironic (but not meaningless) that Mexican cinema is so culturally disparaged. As Carl Mora notes, it is "the largest and most important in the Spanish-speaking world." (p. xi) Along with Argentine cinema, it dominated film production in Latin America for almost three decades. Thus, it has a similar position of cultural hegemony in relation to the Spanish speaking world that the U.S. cinema has to the English speaking world. Further, Mexican cinema is the most important foreign language cinema in the United States, serving the largest Spanish speaking audience outside Latin America and Spain. Nonetheless, it is paradoxically easier to obtain films from Cuba, Bolivia, Brazil or Argentina for non-commercial screenings. Mexican cinema stays almost entirely confined to the commercial screens of the Spanish speaking barrios, reproducing at the cultural level the physical and economic marginality of Mexicans and other Latin Americans in the United States.

This neglect is beginning to be redressed. Carl Mora has generally succeeded in his aim "to provide an introduction to the Mexican commercial cinema for Americans [sic] and other English-speaking readers." (p. xii) *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1980*, a very broad, largely descriptive, survey of the history of Mexican cinema, focuses on films important to the Mexican structure of film production and distribution. Given the almost total lack of anything written in English on Mexican cinema, it is a timely and useful book.

However, the book suffers from today's inflationary processes; the hardcover version, with 140 pages of text, sells for \$30. (Note the outrageous proportions this takes on in Mexico, where \$30 is currently worth 4,500 pesos, approximately a week's wages for an assistant professor.) And the book's scant 140 pages are deceiving, for many pages are taken up with production stills, which do little more than introduce us to the faces of Mexican actors, actresses, and directors. Such visual material could have been of great analytic value had Mora used instead the University of California Press' fine photographic reproductions for frame enlargements with which to study the visual structures of Mexican cinema. The book is filled out with another 140 pages of appendices, notes, bibliography, and index — all of which are useful but, particularly in the case of the appendix (a 100-page listing of Mexican film production, year by year), not essential.

The book's title is also inflationary. The author promises us that the book will show us how Mexican films are a "reflection" of Mexican society. But his lack of background in Mexican history and culture make his fulfilling such a task difficult. Although the book uses a clear chronological framework, Mora makes few attempts to relate the various

films to their specific historical context. When he does, the results are often less than satisfactory. For example, he says in the preface,

"Mexican filmmakers of the 1940s and 1950s responded to their mainly middle-class moviegoers' liking for melodrama and turned out a great number of such movies." (p. xiii)

In using the concept "middle class" to discuss Mexico of the 1940s and 50s, Mora rushes in where almost anyone else would fear to tread. A long and bitterly ideological controversy, still unresolved, debates whether a middle class of such significance existed in Mexico in those years. Mora may be referring to the development of a predominantly urban audience, for in these years Mexico became increasingly urbanized.

But, to be urban is not necessarily to be middle class. I believe that the audience for these movies was (and is) composed of the *pueblo*, the "people": maids, secretaries, campesinos, and workers. The author is apparently unfamiliar with this long debate on the middle classes in Latin America (a debate fueled in part through generous grants from U.S. foundations for studies proving the existence of the Latin American counterparts to the great "American" middle class myth). I feel that he has created an audience demand that probably never really existed.

Mora's lack of background in Mexican culture stands as an even greater hindrance. Writers such as Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz have analyzed many of the concepts popularized in Mexican films, such as the "inferiority complex" and the "pachuco," in depth. Had Mora familiarized himself a little more with Mexican culture, he might have been able to develop these themes and avoid errors of judgment. For example, in discussing MARÍA CANDELARIA, he approvingly notes,

"... false idealization or not, Fernández presented a positive view of Indians ..." (p. 65-6).

But, romantic and idealized renderings of Indians were neither new to Mexican art, nor positive: the art of the late Porfiriato⁽¹⁾ is replete with paintings idealizing Indians to the point of making them appear like ancient robed Athenians. This is simply another way of denying Indians' otherness by reducing them to caricatures. The first duty of a foreign critic, as Michael Chanan argues, is to orient viewers to the otherness of foreign films by directing

"the audience's attention toward those elements that might escape them because of a lack of knowledge of the reality that the film assumes in its own context."⁽²⁾

It is regrettable that Mora cannot build a critic's bridge to the otherness of Mexican cinema, for it was that very otherness which made us students snicker at MARÍA CANDELARIA.

However, the book's shortcomings may also result from Mora's inability

to deal with the subject analytically. Here, given his persistent, simplistic anti-Marxism (out of place in intelligent Mexican film circles), I ask whether or not historical materialism might have given his work more of an analytic focus. The book does provide a useful overview of production and distribution and gives some background on the role of unions, but it never gets below the surface.

One pertinent instance of the work's analytic superficiality is the manner in which it deals with the concept of commercialism, a recurring motif in discussions of Mexican cinema. For example, Reyes Nevares says the new directors in her book attribute the low quality of Mexican films to "an excess of commercialism." (p. 4) And, Mora, in addressing this issue, draws a sharp distinction between U.S. and Mexican producers:

"... the moguls of Hollywood were not only hard-nosed businessmen but also dedicated filmmakers; they plowed their profits back into the movie business. In Mexico, on the other hand, producers were often businessmen out to make a quick profit who had little interest in building a solidly based production company. The directors were hampered in their efforts to make quality films by a strong commercialist imperative ..." (p. 48)

But, how are we to account for this difference between Mexican and U.S. producers? Are Mexicans more avaricious (perhaps because of their Mestizo blood)? Or, does this phenomenon of "excess commercialism" bear a distinct relationship to Mexican neocolonialism — a situation notorious for the difficulties of capital formation and, in the case of cinema, for confronting Hollywood's affluent technical perfectionism.

Rather than attempt to grapple with such issues, Mora appears content to describe. For example, his discussion of commercialism in the recent past seems to flow out of the mouths of Margarita López Portillo and commercial film executives linked to her. Margarita López Portillo is the sister of José López Portillo (President of Mexico, 1976-1982) and was appointed by him as Director of the national government owned system of Radio-Television-Cinema. She virtually dismantled the state cinema apparatus created under Luis Echeverría (President, 1970-1976) and promoted that "return to commercialism" which Mora celebrates in his final chapter. Widely known as "La Macartita" for her McCarthy like purges of the film and television industries, she is almost universally despised for having destroyed Mexico's cinematic past and present. As one writer remarked the day after the National Cineteca burned on March 24, 1982, annihilating Mexico's film history:

"They had already done away with our national cinema's present, and they just now finished doing away with our past."[\(3\)](#)

Margarita López Portillo later stated that she had known the Cineteca was a "time bomb" because of the nitrate film stored below it. But,

rather than spend the 25 million pesos (one million dollars at the time) to make the necessary improvements, she preferred to disburse some 32 million (the official estimate) to fund a ridiculously poor Soviet-Mexican coproduction about John Reed, CAMPANAS ROJAS (RED BELLS). Mexicans are unanimously critical of this great national *churro* (one pro-Soviet director described it as "disgraceful") as they are appalled by the current commercial fare. Mora extols this "return to commercialism" in such statements as these:

"Commercialism has won out in Mexico and the movie industry is enjoying an economic recovery. This is the logical, usual pattern for a capitalist country." (p. 140)

But he cannot substantiate this assertion, and in the current situation it is extremely dubious. Those who live in Mexico and are subjected to movies such as EL MACHO BIÓNICO have a good deal less reason than Mora to cheer.

Not only is Mora's book lacking in historical, cultural, and economic analysis, its descriptions of films are uneven. I assume that if someone chooses to write the history of a national cinema, s/he will necessarily consider what might constitute the elements of that "national style." Mora flirts with the issue in discussing Emilio Fernández, but never develops the argument. He does offer an interesting perspective on what he calls "the most enduring genre of the Mexican cinema, the musical *comedia ranchera*," in his comparison of the *charro* and the U.S. cowboy:

"His [the *charro*'s] environment is not a wild frontier area but a minutely ordered feudal society in which the hacendado presides with paternalistic yet firm authority over his socioeconomic inferiors — the hacienda's employees, tenants, and, of course, women. The *charro* glories in his masculinity and he exercises it not so much to right a wrong but rather to enhance his male self-esteem and social prerogatives. It is the idealization of an attitude firmly rooted not only in the Porfirian past but in Mexico's colonial tradition ..." (p. 47)

An interesting and provocative argument, it reveals the weakness of remaining at a descriptive level. The author accepts the film's definition of "feudal" society. He is seemingly unaware that a highly developed historical discussion (with a definite ideological cast) rages as to precisely when the hacienda system became capitalist. Only the most starry-eyed nostalgia would define the haciendas of the Porfiriato and later periods as feudal. It is well that Mora described this important genre, but analysis is also important.

An equally provocative, but less interesting, discussion takes place around the statist cinema of Echeverría and its "finest example," CANOA. Mora finds CANOA "the most powerful and unsettling statement on the bloody repression of 1968." (p. 124) He states:

“It is nothing short of miraculous that the regime would permit, much less produce, such a statement on the events of 1968, especially so since at the time the incumbent president was widely thought to have been directly responsible for the army's attack on the demonstrators [at Tlatelolco].”(4) (p. 126)

An analysis of the film is crucial as a prime example of the most important and interesting film movement in Mexico's recent past, but such an analysis will also reveal how far short of miraculous it is that the film was produced. CANOA deals with a superstitious village community (Canoa) which, urged on by a reactionary priest, murderously attacks five young employees from the University of Puebla. It is clearly meant as a reference to Tlatelolco, though a Tlatelolco turned inside out and standing on its head. At Tlatelolco, the army massacred those assembled. In CANOA, it is the Mexican pueblo — ignorant and primitive — which attempts to murder the men, who are then saved by the army! The story of an uncivilized and sadistic people who require a strong state (or church) to protect individual lives is at least as old as that of MARÍA CANDELARIA, where Maria is stoned to death by her pueblo because her mother was a prostitute.

So there is nothing miraculous about the fact that the film was produced under Echeverría, given the distinct responsibility he bore for the massacre as Secretary of Gobernación.(5) Felipe Cazals, CANOA's director, reinforces the film's message by using a documentary style. He does so to remind us persistently that "this really happened," but such a technique raises issues about realism and generalization. That is, it may be true that, *in this instance*, the army served to protect the men from a barbaric pueblo. But the enormity of Tlatelolco's horror hangs over Mexico like a savage cloud. The facts insist that it is more generally true of the state (and its representative, the army) to act in a brutal and repressive fashion. What is *really* nothing short of miraculous is that anyone ever swallowed this film's attempt to blame the Mexican people for Tlatelolco — however obliquely disguised the message.

If Mora's book falls short of perfection, it is still much better than Beatriz Reyes Nevares' collection of interviews. Although she has interviewed 13 of the leading Mexican directors, being careful to include both "old" and "new", she offers little of substance in the book. Reyes Nevares' knowledge of cinema appears to be quite limited; rather, she seems thrilled to make contact with such famous personages. The predominant tone of the book is "chummy," if not that of an intellectual "groupie." For example, this is how the book begins with an interview with Emilio Fernández:

"Is Mr. Fernández in?"

"I don't know how many times I repeated this question. On the telephone, in person, in any number of ways. 'El Indio' was never in. Does El Indio Fernández really exist? Who

knows?" ...

"Until the last, one day around noon, in the studios ... The creator of MARÍA CANDELARIA is surrounded by friends, seated at a very long table. It is like a fortress. The group seems impregnable. How can I get him to interrupt the conversation with his friends and say something to me?"

"But El India Fernández isn't as fierce as he is made out to be, or as he wants people to think he is. He sees me from a distance, gets up, and walks toward me. At a small table, next to the one he shares with that chorus, we can talk."

"At last ... and now it happens — as it always seems to in these instances — that I don't know what to ask him. What question would be worthy of this personage of the Mexican cinema? My God, I shouldn't waste this chance." (pp. 11-12)

Such "chummyism" is not only annoying but also important to criticize, for it indicates inexperience with the world of cinema and a non-critical attitude toward it.

Originally published in Spanish as *Trece directores del cine mexicano* (13 Directors of the Mexican Cinema — a little more modest as a title), the book was promoted by Rodolfo Echeverría, brother of President Luis and appointed by him to direct the Banco National Cinematográfico, 1971-76. Evidently, the book's purpose was to push the New Mexican cinema at home and abroad in order to counteract the fact that the Mexican cinema has lost its commercial appeal. "This is the heart of the matter." (p. 4) Paradoxically the excess of commercialism has caused films to lose their commercial appeal, and one response here is to produce an essentially commercial book. The book is useful, although it could have been even more so by listing the various directors' films.

In sum, although I probably wouldn't call these books churros, I believe they were published prematurely. Such are the ways of commercialism. This is particularly disappointing in the case of Carl Mora, for he has obviously put in a great deal of time, effort, and thought. Why did the U.C. Press publish the study before it had really been transformed from Ph.D. thesis (University of Alabama) to book? And why did the University of New Mexico Press decide to translate Reyes Nevares' book when something by Emilio García Rivera or Jorge Ayala Blanco would have been much more substantial?[\(7\)](#)

Both books have disappointing texts but are beautifully printed and contain superb photographic reproductions. While both fill a gap, publishers in general would do well to keep in mind that what gets published in English about Latin America becomes disproportionably important because of the language difference. Though both books contribute to our understanding of a cinema almost totally ignored in the United States — except, of course, by its millions of viewers — the books really bring us no closer to answering the central question about

Mexican cinema: How is it that a culture which has produced world-class art and literature continues to be dominated by a cinema of *churros*? The story of Mexican film is still to be written.

Notes

- [1.](#) The "Porfiriato" (1876-1910) is the period immediately prior to the revolution, during which Porfirio Díaz ruled Mexico.
- [2.](#) "El cine como realidad del otro: la situación de la crítica del nuevo cine latinoamericano en Inglaterra," *Cine Cubano*, No. 101, p. 75.
- [3.](#) Emilio Carballido, "Nos han privado' de nuestra historia nacional fílmica: Emilio García Rivera," *Uno más Uno*, 26 March 1982, p. 19.
- [4.](#) Tlatelolco is the plaza in which the army massacred between 500 to 1000 people on October 2, 1968. The event is referred to as Tlatelolco.
- [5.](#) Secretary of Gobernación is the most powerful of the cabinet positions in Mexico, placing him essentially in charge of internal matters.
- [6.](#) This information comes out of conversations with Alberto Ruy Sánchez, author of the most interesting work to date on cinema during the Echeverría period, *Mitología de un cine en crisis* (Mexico: Premio editora, 1981).
- [7.](#) García Rivera is best known for his indispensable nine-volume study, *Historia documental del cine mexicano* (Mexico: ERA, 1969 on) and Ayala Blanco for his interpretive *La aventura del cine mexicano* (Mexico, ERA, 1968).

Women and representation

by Jane Gaines

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New debates around pornography offer familiar resonances to those who follow feminist film criticism. Feminist analyses of pornography's industry, image and "effect" have overlapped at times with issues in contemporary film theory: the marketing of diversion and pleasure, the relation between violent acts and representations of violence, and the institutionalization of voyeurism.⁽¹⁾ Since the controversial Barnard College conference on "The Politics of Sexuality" last year, the paradigms evoked in the discussions of porn have seemed more and more like the dominant cinema-counter cinema model introduced into feminist film theory in the mid-seventies, but now undergoing change. Now feminist critics are asking, in the struggle against the monoliths serving male desire, is woman's pleasure as counter-pleasure a viable oppositional practice? To raise the question of women's pleasure implies the need for an alternative imagery — and ultimately leads to speculation about a radical pornography for women.

While the Barnard College "pro-sex" conference seems not to have produced the political theory of sexuality that feminists hoped it would produce, it may have lifted some prohibitions which have been blocking other intellectual developments. Until recently, the U.S. feminist stand on pornography appeared to be consistent with the toughest line of the most visible anti-pornography activist group. Some of the first signs of falling away from the hard line on pornography can be seen in *Heresies* (no. 12), the "Sex Issue." A variety of arguments can be found there for challenging the watchdog position on porn, among them that pornography does not *cause* violence against women but rather represents a symptom of patriarchal power relations, that to concentrate on the extreme and exotic can eclipse or even excuse the more common acts of degradation related to the requirements of heterosexuality, and even that pornography may have a subversive potential in a sexually repressive society.⁽²⁾ In "Pornography and Pleasure," Paula Webster turns a critique of the anti-pornography movement into a statement of feminist strategy based on shifting our emphasis from men's pleasure to women's. She says,

"In placing the gratification of men above our own, we pose absolutely no danger to male dominated society."

The "active pursuit of our own gratification" is then a political act. This pursuit, she acknowledges, needs to address the more difficult sexuality and power issue. What if women are aroused by the imagery designed exclusively for male satisfaction?[\(3\)](#)

With the following reviews in this edition, JUMP CUT picks up feminist film criticism at a moment of exasperation with cataloging and analyzing male pleasure. New work on popular fiction for women such as Tania Modleski's *Loving With a Vengeance* (Archon, 1982), reviewed here, marks a redirection of interest away from forms now established as "male" to forms we might call "female." Since the mid-seventies, it has been the critical vogue to study the cinematic pleasure in the classic realist text — the male look or "gaze" controls viewing within the film and sets the spectator's "looking position." Analysis in this tradition has considered "sexual difference" as the eroticizing hinge on which classical Hollywood cinema turns. For the female, there are two places of sorts in this construct — as either overvalued "fetishized" star (imagine Mae West or Marlene Dietrich), exhibited and displayed, no more than a sign in a "patriarchal exchange," or in the audience, but occupying the point of view reserved for the male. In other words, since these are negative spaces, the female is excluded. She cannot speak or act out to shape culture from an indentation. Much of the thought included here in JUMP CUT, no. 29, is in some regard a reassessment of this particular formulation of female image and cinema. Dealing with woman as spectacle poses a special challenge to the feminist filmmaker who would create alternative representations and a political commentary on the photographic "uses" of the female body.

Since two academic books reviewing the field have now been published, this would seem a milestone year in feminist film theory. Yet, the reviewers of Ann Kaplan's *Women and Film* (Methuen, 1983) and Annette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) lament that what was so recently an on-going, open discussion has quickly solidified into a respectable field of study. Sara Halprin regrets the way the books' publication has cemented the debates and canonized the films at the center of these discussions so that what is left over becomes relegated to the periphery. Jacqueline Levitin's sense of *Women's Pictures* is that it has shut down activity.

Sara Halprin (*aka* Barbara Martineau) was a contributor to *Women and Film*, the first journal devoted to the subject, started in 1972. Martineau reported there on the earliest women's film festivals in Europe, Canada and the U.S. Those festivals occurred at a point to which we will not return, when the same two films always represented Third World and lesbian perspectives (SAMBIZANGA, Maldoror, 1972; MAEDCHEN IN UNIFORM, Sagan, 1931), and the sole criterion for exhibiting a film was that it was directed by a woman — regardless of what the film's politics might have been. Feminists had only begun to consider how to gauge the

politics of a film text. Now, although the relation between feminist politics and film aesthetics has been more adequately theorized, these books may give readers the impression that the issues have been settled. The books imply that, using the specified combination of psychoanalytic theory, structuralism and semiotics, feminist critics can locate the ideological — in this case, the inscription of patriarchal social relations in narrative and photographic codes. In giving this impression, both Kuhn and Kaplan privilege the work of a small group of British feminist theorists.

The history of feminist film criticism in Britain and the U.S. might be written as pre and post "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" by Laura Mulvey — the source of inspiration and method for no much of the current work on woman as spectacle. Concepts such as "visual pleasure" and "passionate detachment" (the title of one of Kuhn's chapters) date from that article, which also introduced Freudian terms such as "The Law of the Father" and "disavowal" into feminist film criticism — although they had been suggestively used along the same lines in *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s collective analysis of MOROCCO, (4) originally published in 1970 but not translated into English until 1980. First delivered in a seminar in 1973 in the French department at the University of Wisconsin, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was published in the British *Screen* in 1975 and reprinted two years later in the U.S. in Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary's *Women and the Cinema* anthology. (5) In the previous issue of *Screen*, Christian Metz's "The Imaginary Signifier" had appeared in translation along with a forward on the integration of Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts into film theory, giving some background on the relation of the symbolic and the imaginary, desire, the unconscious, and "the look." (6) Such Lacanian concepts were also central to the Mulvey article and now, it seems, are the favored currency of exchange on women and cinema, with an entire publication in the U.S. (*Camera Obscura*) devoted to this approach.

Mulvey's identification of the female image as phallic substitute and/or fetish image may not have been inspired entirely by Hollywood glamour images. Just before the publication of "Visual Pleasure," she undertook an attack on Allan Jones, one of the most notorious "exploiters" of the female form in the British art world. "You Don't Know What is Happening Do You, Mr. Jones?," published in *Spare Rib* is an encyclopedic review of Jones' visions of female body contortion and torture. Fettered in the classic imagery of the private fetishist — belts, spike heels, rubber corsets, brassieres and garters — the Jones' models do articulate the worst things that feminists had imagined in male fantasies about women. (7) Was Mulvey still fuming over Allan Jones when she developed her theory of women in cinema as fetishized projection of the male consciousness?

Some feminists have opposed all the uses of Freud in criticism. Why borrow a method which is based on describing women's "repressed place" in language and society, they argue. What new understanding of oppression can it yield? To be fair, the British feminist use of

psychoanalysis follows Juliet Mitchell's re-reading of Freud, which she takes to be a kind of description of the ideological or an illumination of the site of gender construction.⁽⁸⁾ But Freudian theory is slippery. If one says, as Kaplan does in *Women and Film* that "... the pleasure in the cinema is created through the inherently voyeuristic mechanism that comes into play," does this mean that pleasure in looking is innate rather than learned? Here feminists can lose their best argument: that gender differences are socially constructed.⁽⁹⁾ Freud strikes a mean between the biological and the social and can be interpreted both ways.⁽¹⁰⁾ Often, Freudian concepts as used in film theory encourage intellectual short cuts which can misrepresent exceedingly complex relations, such as the historical connection between the invention of motion pictures and the discovery of the unconscious, often represented in the metaphoric use of *mechanism* to refer to the cinema apparatus and the unconscious, as though the Freudian term proved a correspondence.

For Marxists, the use of psychoanalysis, which privileges an autonomous realm, is especially problematic. With no clear means of connecting gender construction to historically shifting economic conditions, feminists may have difficulty implementing programs for political change. Christine Gledhill has discussed this problem in her critique of feminist film criticism. Evaluating the impact of Althusser's introduction of Lacan into the Marxist theory of ideology, Gledhill argues that if feminists are up against the "ideologically positioned" subject, political change begins to look like an impossible task. She estimates,

"... we are clearly in a very weak political position if rupturing the place of the subject in representation is our chief point of entry."⁽¹¹⁾

The other criticism of British feminist film theory consistently leveled by other Marxist feminists has been directed at the special knowledge reading such theory requires and the elite position it can foster. On this point, Kaplan was originally one of the clearest and strongest critics of the British. Her review of "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" and Pam Cook and Claire Johnston's work on Raoul Walsh and Dorothy Arzner in *JUMP CUT* (no. 12/13) stressed that a background in psychoanalytic theory was a prerequisite to these discussions. Furthermore, to make sense of the arguments at all, the reader had to unquestioningly go along with the Freudian premises on which they were based. Kaplan asked then what might be new about Freudian interpretations, already established in literary criticism:

"The predictable nature of such interpretations takes away from their interest ... given the premises, everything else follows like clockwork."⁽¹²⁾

In retrospect, it is clear what is new. British feminists have used psychoanalysis to extend important work on film as language. But Kaplan's remark about the predictability of Freudian analysis still describes much feminist film criticism on woman as spectacle, and this

means the bulk of the academic work extending feminist film theory in the U.S. To the insider, this criticism explicating the "look" and unraveling the Oedipal can come off "like clockwork." (This may be some of its appeal.) To the outsider, such criticism is often as impenetrable as the patriarchal unconscious it hopes to penetrate. In the U.S., the incorporation of psychoanalysis into feminist film criticism has coincided with acadamizing the study. Has the study of popular film, once not no respectable, been suddenly made distinguished and serious via the female scholar's association with French theory?

Another explanation for feminist film criticism's concentration on male pleasure might be that Mulvey and Johnston set the destruction of narrative fiction film as *the* priority in feminist film criticism. As Mulvey puts it, those cinematic codes which

"create a gaze, a world, and an object ... must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged."[\(13\)](#)

As this has been interpreted, work on the language of mainstream cinema must *precede* the construction of a "new language of desire." Although Mulvey here makes the creation of a feminist cinema contingent on challenging dominant forms, elsewhere in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" she seems to say that since new forms of pleasure can't as yet be imagined, we might as well do what we *can* do while we are waiting – "break down" the pair of pleasures classical cinema offers: voyeuristic "looking" and narrative closure.

"Breaking down" seems also to have been interpreted largely as formal analysis, although it can refer as well to counter-cinema practice which fragments and interrupts classical cinema's illusion. Johnston's "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" more clearly posits that the constructing of new forms depends on destroying the old by means of filmmaking practices. She writes,

"New meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film."[\(14\)](#)

Camera movement, continuity editing, framing, narrative unity, spectator point of view, and the spectacle of woman are all analyzed in feminist counter-cinema. In theory this is a continuation of Godard's project to combat ideological forms with film form. Counter-cinema also borrows from Brecht's idea that annihilating pleasure and identification can effect critical distance and ultimately a change of consciousness in the theatrical audience. The final "test" of counter-cinema has to do with whether the film shows that what we are seeing is shaped by cinematic form *and* that beyond the experience of the film, there is no such thing as unmediated reality to know.

Leftist filmmaking will find drawbacks to this approach. First of all, this is a very difficult concept to grasp. Those of us who eat, sleep and breathe political theories of representation, who have made the politics

of meaning our life's work, are not always aware of the degree to which our own consciousness is shaped by words, images, or other signifying material. Are we asking too much of a film text if we expect it to effect change on its own, especially if it is seen out of the context of political organizing and education efforts? Second, why should a film which considers its own signification process necessarily have to require its audiences to know advanced film theory in order for them to enjoy, appreciate and, hopefully, reflect on what they see?

The Black women filmmakers Claudia Springer interviews in this issue of JUMP CUT agree that it is more important for them to make their films comprehensible than for them to experiment with subverting classical Hollywood narrative. The content of these films (Black body language and image, child custody, childbirth, single parenting, prostitution as survival, rape, and women's retaliation against sexual abuse) certainly constitutes a strong political challenge to white male society. Do these films represent any less of a challenge because they use conventional forms?

Can filmmakers afford to undertake an abstract analysis or make an educational statement *about* representation if it is politically imperative that they represent a "brutal actuality" in order to counteract its ideological version? As Kimberly Safford points out in her review of LA OPERACIÓN, the most direct way to demystify "sterilization" for the filmmakers is to use documentary realism to demonstrate that since the tubes are always severed in surgery, the operation is not easily reversible, as many Puerto Rican women continue to believe. LA OPERACIÓN makes this argument with a conventional journalistic verite technique — graphic detailing of the seldom seen (here the surgery itself). The theory here is that photographic "reality" which directly contradicts viewers' conceptions has the power to reverse these conceptions.

Still, the traditional documentary format may have its limitations when it comes to representing the complex ideological function "sterilization" has for Puerto Ricans. Historically linked with migration to the U.S., sterilization as a policy has contributed to maintaining the idea that Puerto Rican economic problems are due to overpopulation. Within Puerto Rico, where the operation was first performed in 1925 as a means of controlling malnutrition and poverty, sterilization has come to be seen by poor women as *the only* birth control measure. The concept of birth control choices or options is thus culturally unimaginable. Finally, because of cultural ideas about fertility and sexuality, sterilization has only "liberated" Puerto Ricans' sexual expression in theory.⁽¹⁵⁾ Here, also, is a challenge to the cultural bias of middle class feminist histories which cite freedom from worry about conception as provided by dependable birth control to be one of the milestones in the course of sexual liberation.

For all the interest in counter-cinema as theory, U.S. feminist filmmaking practice seems to have been influenced very little by British

models. To begin with, there have been few examples offered by British feminists since *THE NIGHTCLEANERS* (Berwick St. Collective, 1975) and *RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX* (Mulvey and Wollen, 1977). Mulvey's own high theory film austere avoids continuity editing and withholds narrative resolution to such an extreme that women viewers have often found it disorienting. The subversion of sexual looking, fascinating as a concept, does not become so riveting in its translation to the screen. *THE NIGHTCLEANERS*, although equally difficult for viewers, may have worked as political education because it was produced in conjunction with an ongoing union campaign.[\(16\)](#)

U.S. feminist filmmaking has served a woman's movement which is more visible but more politically diffuse than its British equivalent. This may explain why more than one tradition of radical filmmaking is currently thriving here. Documentaries in the style of *UNION MAIDS* (Reichert and Klein, 1976) have been strong with unions and community groups. Using the rhetoric of archival footage or testimonial interview, these documentaries employ existing cinematic conventions without questioning them. As the films have been effective as organizing tools, they pose another challenge to the counter-cinema theorem that "revealing" in photography the "truth" of woman's oppression cannot effect change. Many feminist films which *have* taken up the issue of representation and ideology have done so with less deference to Godard. Now we are seeing more inventive solutions to this problem in political aesthetics: how to make an engaging film that uses disengagement.

Michelle Citron's *WHAT YOU TAKE FOR GRANTED*, reviewed here by JoAnn Elam, shows that the film viewing experience is another one of those aspects of bourgeois life which we "take for granted." One way this film points out the "taken for grantedness" of camera "reality" is slowly to reveal to the viewer that what appears to be documentary-style interview footage of women talking about the "realities" of their murky lives is actually acted — a convincing reenactment. Beyond that, the women "characters" contradict themselves -saying one thing about their careers and personal lives in the documentary interview sections and refuting earlier statements in the "story" sections. In trying to make sense of the film, the viewer has to consider the contradictory nature of bourgeois consciousness.

JoAnn Elam's *LIE BACK AND ENJOY IT*, with its title's ironic reference to "advice" given to rape victims (a phrase that represents one of the most grotesque distortions of women's experience), uses the analogy between violation and representation to argue the political implications of the act of photographing women. Reviewer Claudia Gorbman notes that the film uses several fresh strategies for "acknowledging" its own construction — the voice-over debate about representation in the film itself and references to the sound recording. With humor, Elam asks,

"What if women were the only ones who could photograph women?"

While Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" may have

set up an equation between mainstream cinema and male privilege which had diverted the attention of feminist scholars, it also seems to have provided an "out" for them — introducing an interest in the spectator into contemporary film theory.⁽¹⁷⁾ From there, questions about the class, race and gender of the spectator have inevitably arisen. The articles in this section suggest that the very questions Mulvey did not address have become the most compelling: Is the female spectator restricted to viewing the female body on the screen from the male point of view? Is narrative pleasure always male pleasure? Various strategies of reappropriation imply that the female "look" can cancel the male point of view and that textual reading can actively "resist" the flow of classical narrative.

In November 1980, at the Lolita Raclin Rogers Memorial Feminist Film Conference held at Northwestern University, Lucie Arbuthnot and Gall Seneca presented a re-reading of *GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES*, launching one of the most convincing challenges to date to seeing cinematic pleasure as male. They argue that in this film Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe "resist objectification" and project an intimacy with each other which offers a new vision to female viewers, inviting both identification and a kind of female voyeurism.⁽¹⁸⁾ In this tradition, Chris Straayer's reconsideration of *PERSONAL BEST*, included here, suggests that the power and force of the female "look" has been underestimated, as has the complexity of female audience response. Her interviews with lesbian viewers propose a model. She finds evidence in lesbian respondents' ingenious viewing strategies for the study of woman's consciousness as potential revolutionary consciousness, harboring conflict and opposition. In contrast with formal analysis, sociological studies such as this may seem relatively "messy" in the way they deal with "real people" and their "gut" feelings, inarticulate responses, and "just plain opinions." Straayer's study reminds us that meaning is always social, and that hothouse studies of film language cannot alone construct a semiotics of the cinema.

Considering the lesbian as spectator shifts all of the premises of feminist film theory centered on male voyeurism.⁽¹⁹⁾ In the introduction to the Lesbian Special Section, appearing in *JUMP CUT* (no. 24/25), Edith Becker, Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, and B. Ruby Rich describe how the exclusion of a lesbian perspective has seriously "warped" contemporary film theory:

"A true recognition of lesbianism would seriously challenge the concept of women as inevitable objects of exchange between men, or as fixed in an eternal trap of "sexual difference" based on heterosexuality. Feminist theory that sees all women on the screen only as objects of male desire — including by implication, lesbians — is inadequate."⁽²⁰⁾

To consider the exquisitely "fit," female fantasy bodies in *FLASHDANCE* only in terms of male desire, one would have to ignore women's responses to the film. *LIANNA* features a wholesomely attractive lesbian

and represents her sexual awakening. To consider that film in terms of the male "look," especially *within* the film, would be to negate its premises.

Lisa DiCaprio's review shows that conceptually LIANNA is not the film a lesbian would have made. Visually it is probably not the film a heterosexual woman would have made either. LIANNA is apologetic and cautious about photographing women. The tentative representation of lesbian lovemaking, for instance, tries not to intrude voyeuristically or shape salaciously. The film attempts to reverse the cliché of looking at women on the street in the montage of bodies Lianna sees just after she has first made love with Ruth. But LIANNA is an object lesson in how *à* to try to undercut male "looking." Showing wholesome lesbian bodies with restraint neither withdraws the image entirely from male view nor subtracts the "to-be-looked-at" connotations from the female body. Finally, as a film about female desire, LIANNA is incredibly pallid.

FLASBDANE, in contrast, sets up an alluring inducement to give oneself over with abandon to looking at the dancers. Judging from the film's reception, women audiences have taken up the invitation with enthusiasm. My informal poll of friends shows that both gay and straight women have claimed this film. Some said it was the first film in years that they had gone back to see a second time. Does the "fantasy of control" Katherine Kalinak describes in her review explain why women are dancing along with FLASHDANE videocassettes in their living rooms and signing up for classes in jazz dance after seeing the film?(21) If women read this as "their" film, do they then accept or reject the long-stemmed roses and the preferred reading that Nick was right? That Alex should not stubbornly squander her opportunity to try out just because he had used his connections to get her the dance troupe audition.? Conceivably, women could choose to see that Alex has refused the "break" the backstage hoofer in the 30s musical was always glad to get. To Alex, the "big break" is a handout.

Have Black women seen the same fantasy of transcendence and control in DIVA? Ernece Kelly points out in her review of DIVA that even though the film highlights the operatic performance of exceptionally talented Black singer, Wilhamina Wiggins-Collins, the plot line eroticizes and trivializes her characterization. The exotic Black beauty is an old stereotype, presented in updated form in this homage to Godard's New Wave style. Black women viewers, however, have liked the film because it provides a rare chance for them to see a Black in a significant role.

Does the response first to PERSONAL BEST and now FLASHDANCE suggest that women are suddenly "ready" for their own eroticized imagery, which would mean that they would no longer have to steal their glancing pleasure in the cinema or reroute their own plots? It is not as though historically women's sexual fantasies have never been served. Feminist work on women's traditional fiction, such as Harlequin and gothic novels, melodrama and soap operas, shows that women have

turned to these forms because the genres direct their readers through familiar conflicts with loved ones and provide releases and gratifications women need but probably won't find in conventional marriage.

For example, Ann Barr Snitow calls mass-market romance "women's pornography." She shows that we must reconsider narrative forms previously dismissed as reactionary if we find that they contain the rhythms and outlines of women's sexual imagination. She says,

"The romantic intensity of Harlequins — the waiting, fearing, speculating — are as much a part of their functioning as pornography for women as are the more overtly sexual scenes." [\(22\)](#)

Jane Feuer, in her review of Tania Modleski's *Loving With a Vengeance*, stresses that the value of Modleski's work on soaps for feminist film theory is that it promises a model for the emerging feminist aesthetic. Feuer notes that the chapter on soap opera identifies female narrative forms which are quite distinct from male forms, and that these forms derive from those experiences which are thought to be woman's "lot in life" — waiting, anticipating, and the state of being constantly interrupted. Modleski's argument implies that women's forms of pleasure won't necessarily be "made from scratch," but that existing forms need to be reclaimed for ourselves, since, as she says,

"this pleasure is currently placed at the service of the patriarchy." [\(23\)](#)

This formulation of the female narrative strategy shares something with Annette Kuhn's conception of the "feminine voice" which she finds in four contemporary avant-garde films made by women: *THRILLER* (Potter, 1979), *DAUGHTER RITE* (Citron, 1978), *LIVES OF PERFORMERS* (Rainer, 1972), and *JEANNE DIELMAN* (Ackerman, 1975). These films organize a different pleasure through rearrangement of the "relations of looking" and rejection of narrative closure. Still, however, she carefully separates examples of "feminine writing" and counter-cinema, although the distinction between the two may be losing its usefulness. [\(24\)](#) The idea that "taking back our pleasure" is political in its own right seems to be gathering more force, both in feminist film theory and within the women's movement.

Notes

[1.](#) For further elaboration of these similarities, see Julia Lesage, "Women and Pornography," *JUMP CUT*, No. 26 (December 1981), pp. 46-47.

[2.](#) Ellen Willis in "Who is a Feminist?: A Letter to Robin Morgan," *Village Voice* (December 1981), p. 17, has argued that women's enjoyment of pornography could be seen as a "form of resistance to a culture that would allow [them] no sexual pleasure at all."

[3.](#) Paula Webster, "Pornography and Pleasure," *Heresies* 3, No. 4 (Fall

1981), p. 50.

4. "MOROCCO," *Cahiers du Cinéma* No. 225 (November-December 1970), pp. 5-13; Diana Matias, trans., reprinted in Peter Baxter, ed., *Sternberg* (London: British Film Institute 1980), pp. 81-93. I am indebted to Chuck Kleinhans for pointing out this correspondence to me.

5. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16:2 (Autumn 1975) 6-18; reprinted in eds. Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, *Women and the Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), pp. 412-428.

6. Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," trans. Ben Brewster, *Screen* 16:2 (Summer 1975), 14-76. Julia Lesage's "The Hunan Subject — You, He, or He?" which challenged the editors of *Screen* on their incorporation of psychoanalytic terms into film theory appeared in this same issue, reprinted from JUMP CUT.

7. Laura Mulvey, "You Don't Know What is Happening, Do You, Mr. Jones?" *Spare Rib* 8 (February 1973), pp. 13-30; reprinted in Marsha Rowe, ed., *Spare Rib Reader* (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 48-57.

8. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Harmondsworth, 1975).

9. Michelle Barrett, in *Women's Oppression Today* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 73, objects to the same sort of thing when she points to the usage of the term "sexual difference" in psychoanalytic theory. Gender difference is the social construction, she says, not sexual difference, which has generally meant the biological distinction between male and female.

10. For further elaboration on this see Sebastiano Timpanaro, *The Freudian Slip* (London: New Left Books, 1976), p. 12.

11. Christine Gledhill, "Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3:4 (Fall 1978), 483.

12. Ann Kaplan, "Aspects of British Feminist Film Theory: A Critical Evaluation of Texts by Claire Johnston and Pam Cook," JUMP CUT, No. 12/13 (December 1976), p. 54.

13. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," p. 17.

14. Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in Claire Johnston, ed., *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973), p. 29.

15. Iris Lopez, paper delivered at "Feminist Issues in Communication" Conference, Hunter College, New York, December 1983.

16. Claire Johnston, "Re-thinking Political Cinema," JUMP CUT, No. 12/13 (December 1976). p. 55.

[17.](#) Mulvey has since modified her provocative position that spectator point of view in the cinema is consistently the male point of view. In "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by DUEL IN THE SUN," *Framework* (1981), she admits that her masculinized spectator-screen image relation was a calculated irony and that the real gender of the viewer was not a consideration here.

[18.](#) Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, "Pre-text and Text in GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES," *Film Reader* 5 (Winter 1981-82), p.14.

[19.](#) Edith Becker, Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, and B.Ruby Rich, "Lesbians and Film: Introduction to Special Section," JUMP CUT, No. 24/25 (March 1981), p. 17.

[20.](#) Ibid., P. 21.

[21.](#) Interview with Bobbie Embree, instructor, Bounds Studio of Dance, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, November 10, 1983.

[22.](#) Ann Barr Snitow, "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women Is Different," *Radical History Review* 20 (Spring/Summer 1979), p. 157.

[23.](#) Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1982), p. 104.

[24.](#) Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 169.

Women and Film Words from our mothers

from *Jump Cut*, no. 29, February 1984, p. 27

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Below is the editorial from the second issue of *Women and Film* published in 1972. The range of concerns expressed here still apply to the area of feminist film criticism: providing an outlet for feminist writing, establishing and maintaining distribution networks, seeing women's films (which disappear from distribution or never get distribution), opposing "supercool" intellectual analysis, recruiting Third World perspectives, and combating women's oppression actively.
— The Editors

"We are encouraged by the good response we have been receiving; and regret that we cannot print all the articles submitted. They were all interesting but space is limited. We hope women will keep writing.

Women and Film, No. 2, has been delayed slightly because we are a small staff and we have had to spend much of our time establishing a workable distribution network. Also we wanted to provide adequate coverage of the recent First International Festival of Women's Films.

Although most of the criticism we have received has been helpful, some was defensive and antagonistic. A few have objected to our 'rhetoric' calling it 'shrill.' The editorial in the first issue was a position paper. Writing from the gut level should not be confused with hysteria or irrationality. Supercool intellectual analysis can be as empty, insincere, irrational and irresponsible as it is cool.

Our contributors express their concerns according to their temperaments. The cry of oppression and exploitation is not a 'shrill' complaint, it is a desperate struggle for freedom and dignity. We are not trying to add a chapter to academic film literature, we are trying to change our situation. But on the whole, response is positive, and constructive suggestions will help the magazine evolve into something better.

We welcome manuscripts on media from all beings, particularly from

black and third world sisters. We hope to have our third issue out by November/December."

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Loving with a Vengeance Women's narrative pleasures

by Jane Feuer

from *Jump Cut*, no. 29, February 1984, pp. 28-29

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Tania Modleski. *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982), 140 pg.

Tania Modleski's study of three forms of women's popular narratives — Harlequin romances, gothic novels, and TV soap operas — seems to me a work of major significance not merely for women's studies or popular culture but for film studies as well. Since JUMP CUT readers might overlook it, I hope in this review to indicate its relevance to current debates in film theory. The author undertook the study

“out of concern that these narratives were not receiving the right kind of attention. I try to avoid expressing either hostility or ridicule, to get beneath the embarrassment, which I am convinced provokes both the anger and the mockery, and to explore the reasons for the deep-rooted and centuries old appeal of the narratives. Their enormous and continuing popularity, I assume, suggests that they speak to very real problems and tensions in women's lives. The narrative strategies that have evolved for smoothing over these tensions can tell us much about how women have managed not only to live in oppressive circumstances but to invest their situations with some degree of dignity” (pp. 14-15).

In this way the author takes on and manages to modify some tendencies in feminist criticism that heretofore have circumscribed a serious consideration of women's mass culture. Arguing against the view taken by Ann Douglas that Harlequins appeal in a purely escapist fashion to feminine masochism, Modleski avoids the elitist position of condemning women who enjoy these works. In arguing against the now dominant Laura Mulvey position that all narrative pleasure is male pleasure, she counters convincingly that soap operas represent a specifically female

form of narrative pleasure. All of this is accomplished within a work that combines theoretical sophistication with a firm sense of political commitment and clarity of prose style.

In a theoretical introductory chapter (which also attempts to trace the historical lineage of the three genres under consideration) Modleski stresses the need for a method of "reading" feminine rage under the surface of seemingly hegemonic texts. She rejects out of hand the Frankfurt school position that only high art, as "the last preserve of an autonomous critical spirit," can contain liberating elements. Instead, she favors Fredric Jameson's idea that mass art often contains many specific criticisms of everyday life, working upon real anxieties that must have some effective presence in the mass culture text in order to be effectively "managed" or repressed. She links this to the Althusserian notion that we are all inside ideology.

As have many other feminist theorists, Modleski turns to psychoanalytical theory in order to "read" the resistances in Harlequins, Gothics and soaps. She also uses literary aesthetics — specifically narrative analysis and reader response theory — as part of her "contribution to a psychology of the interaction between feminine readers and texts" (p. 31). In contrast to Laura Mulvey, Modleski believes that women's mass culture narratives relate to a feminine form of narrative pleasure, as reflected by the female Oedipal saga delineated in Gothics, and, especially, in soap operas as "the one visual, narrative art uniquely adapted to the psychology of the woman in the home." In all three forms, women are involved in "reading" men's reactions.

Her approach to Harlequins reveals the benefits of taking a "serious" approach to popular narrative, employing the tools of literary analysis rather than taking the works at face value. For what Modleski discovers by examining the dynamics of the reading process for Harlequins is that the selfless "disappearing act" seemingly required of both heroine and reader has beneath it an outlet for feminine (if not feminist) rage. Popular culture texts tend to be elusive not in their complexity but rather in their simplicity. Their complexity lies not in the deciphering of the meaning of the text but rather in the deciphering of the psycho-cultural dynamics of the reading process.

Modleski has hit upon an ingenious solution to the interpretive enigmas posed by Harlequins: she pretends they are "real" novels. By applying forms of literary analysis, for example the notion of point of view, she is able to make the discovery that there is a relation between the narrative point of view and a presumed reader response. It is required that Harlequins be written in the third person, a production exigency that would seem to diminish reader identification with the heroine. However, narration takes the form of what Roland Barthes calls "personal narration" in which "I" could be substituted for "she" without a change in meaning. Thus a close identification of the hopes and fears of the reader with those of the Harlequin heroine becomes possible.

However, Modleski discovers, at crucial moments in the narrative when

the women's appearance is noted, the narration retreats to “apersonal” third person narration causing a split between the reader and the woman. Modleski relates this to John Berger's ideas that a woman's way of seeing in our culture must be schizoid. At the same time that she exists as an object of sight for men, she must continually survey herself from a male point of view.

Evidence of this doubled perspective is also apparent in Modleski's approach to the overall reading dynamics. In the Harlequin formula, a young, innocent woman becomes involved with a handsome older man whose behavior towards her — contemptuous and often brutal — confuses her. Yet it does not confuse the reader because the reader has “retrospective illumination” from her knowledge of the Harlequin formula. Unlike the heroine, the reader is able to read back from the formula ending in which all misunderstandings are cleared away and the hero reveals he has loved the girl all along. The reader may identify emotionally with the heroine without suffering her confusion.

Modleski finds, in this distancing the potential for expressing strong revenge fantasies upon men for the way they treat women (the heroine exhibits quite a bit of hostility toward the hero for the way he treats her) while at the same time easing women's guilt at their anger (we know he loved her all along), Modleski relates this reader response to psychoanalytical theories of hysteria and feminine masochism. She reverses the usual psychoanalytical approach which posits that women's anxieties about rape (the manifest content) conceal the desire to be taken by force (latent content). Modleski finds that in romance fantasies, the desire to be taken by force (manifest content) conceals anxiety about rape and longings for power and revenge (latent content).

Modleski concludes that rather than condemning Harlequins, we should condemn the social conditions that have made them necessary. In this way she avoids the “blame the victim” approach which in condemning mass fiction (which Modleski certainly doesn't see as an unqualifiedly positive force) also condemns the women who enjoy them. In fact, she shows that the process of reading Harlequins is not one of passive escapism but actually demonstrates an active process of reading. This kind of interpretation is similar to the growing number of studies which reveal the mental activity involved in the deciphering of “classical Hollywood narratives” and represents a salutary corrective to “hypodermic” theories of mass culture which posit that ideologies are “injected” into the subject's consciousness with no active participation on her part.

It is in her discussion of soap operas, however, that the author's willingness to treat feminine narratives as complex formal and ideological structures yields the greatest rewards. Modleski believes that soap operas constitute a uniquely feminine narrative form. Their lack of closure, multiple identification, and emphasis on the “reading” of facial expressions in close up — to name several prominent features of soap operas as narrative — constitute the subject/spectator as an ideal

mother whose sympathies go out to "all her children."

There is one exception to this — the character of the villainess. The most autonomous type of woman on soaps, the villainess provides an outlet for feminine anger. Moreover, the conditions of reception for soap operas correlate with the rhythms of woman's work in the home. She partly argues against Raymond Williams' concept of "flow" — the idea that TV programs are parts of a whole and that shifts from one programming type to another should not be seen as interruptions. For Modleski, the flow within soaps as well as between soaps and other daytime programming units (e.g. game shows)

"reinforces the very principle of interruptability crucial to the proper functioning of women in the home ... What Williams calls the 'central television experience' is a profoundly decentering experience."

Modleski believes that the narrative form of soaps, which "makes anticipation of an end an end itself", invests pleasure in the central experience of women's lives: waiting.

Arguing against critics who see soaps' formlessness as ideologically complicit with dominant ideological structures, Modleski suggests that the "process without progression" implied by soap opera's lack of closure should not be taken in an entirely negative light, since it may provide a basis for new forms of feminist art. She finds a positive value in the possibility that soap operas may have the force of a negation of the typical (masculine) modes of pleasure in our society, in line with other popular texts which break with the illusion of unity and totality promised by the "classic realist narrative." Soap operas are anti-progressive:

"In direct contrast to the typical male narrative film, in which the climax functions to resolve difficulties, the 'mini-climaxes' of soap operas function to introduce difficulties and to complicate rather than simplify the characters' lives" (p. 107).

Soap operas also tell us a lot about women's fantasies, the most powerful one being that of a "fully self-sufficient family." Rather than condemn this fantasy as politically reactionary, Modleski believes that the longing for community can be progressive as well. The spectator is longing for an alternative to her own isolation in the nuclear family. The author concludes that soaps allay real anxiety and satisfy real needs and desires, even though the soaps may distort them. Modleski concludes that at present, the anti-feminist right is addressing these needs; however, the left cannot afford to ignore them.

While Tania Modleski's work on soap operas will surely be the starting point for all future studies of the form, I find that in its pioneering effort to stake out the territory, she has tended to reduce both the differences among soap operas and the extent to which the form has evolved over

the past ten years. This reflects the major limitation of the book as a whole: the relative absence of any detailed textual analysis. Specifically, I would suggest that some soap operas — GENERAL HOSPITAL, for instance — have moved away from the uniquely feminine narrative pleasure in their efforts to capture male viewers.

GENERAL HOSPITAL took the lead in introducing adventure and suspense plots with exterior settings, chase scenes and traditional male heroic types (the gangster, the adventurer, the spy). By making a "tragic hero" of Luke Spencer, GH has unbalanced the multiple narrative structure by coming close to having a "protagonist" in the usual linear sense. On the other hand, a soap opera such as ALL MY CHILDREN has remained, narratively speaking, more within the scope of feminine narrative pleasure, even as it has introduced younger characters and more "trendy" plot lines. Another way of putting this would be that GENERAL HOSPITAL has broken with the "theatrical" model for soap operas and become more "cinematic" in its handling of space, time and character types. The consequence has been that Hollywood codes for masculine pleasure have been blended in to the "feminine" soap opera narrative structure. Examples include the use of stock character types (Luke — the macho adventurer; Heather Weber — the archetypal film noir spider woman); the increasing complexity of cinematic vocabulary (including an increase in long shots which fetishize the female body); and the introduction of linear plot lines into the non-linear soap opera narrative. These new "masculine" structures, however, have not replaced GENERAL HOSPITAL's multiple-focus narrative. Rather, they've been added onto it.

Instead of being merely "feminine" narratives, soap operas seem to me to be sponge-like structures capable of absorbing narrative patterns from a variety of sources. Their essentially "feminine" nature may have been a temporary historical phenomenon. On the other hand, we have seen the blending of soap opera structures into the most macho of TV formats, the cop show, culminating in the hybrid HILL STREET BLUES. Since Modleski's study is primarily synchronic, she can't account for these diachronic changes, which would modify but not negate her ideas. Network television's merger of masculine with feminine narrative strategies should provide a forum for the study of their interaction and possible mutual accommodation.

Loving with a Vengeance connects with an emerging current of scholarship in popular culture which tries to mediate between the Frankfurt School's condemnation of all mass culture as tools of the dominant ideology, and the *Journal of Popular Culture's* approach, which fails to see the political ramifications in its wholehearted endorsement of these texts' mythic pleasures. Following Richard Dyer, whose pivotal article "Entertainment and Utopia" she quotes in an "Afterword," Modleski sees these mass-produced fantasies for women as providing a "Utopian" escape into another world, one very different from the alienated one of advanced capitalism, although sharing many real world problems. However, also agreeing with Dyer, she points out

that these fantasies are incomplete, offering only those Utopian ideals that capitalism itself promises to meet. Popular feminine texts do not, for example, question the myth of male superiority or the institutions of marriage and the family, although they do provide outlets for women's dissatisfactions with those conditions. As Modleski states in the concluding paragraph of her book:

It is useless to deplore the texts for their omissions, distortions, and conservative affirmations. It is crucial to understand them: to let their very omissions and distortions speak, informing us of the contradictions they are meant to conceal, and, equally importantly, of the fears that lie behind them.

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Women's Pictures Guidelines for Feminist Criticism

by Jacqueline Levitin

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Annette Kuhn. *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*
(Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 226 pages.
\$11.50

The feminist film circle is known for keeping track of itself. Periodically an article appears taking stock of new developments in feminist film theory, explaining their relative merits and proposing alternatives. Like the women's movement itself, this writing is polemical. Insults, dressed in academically approved dissections and counter-proofs, lose little of their sting. In such a battleground (battle signals vitality and one's passion for the subject), Annette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* is the gentlest and most comprehensive of feminist film stocktaking. Not an anthology, it nevertheless quotes or footnotes almost every contributor to the field, often in generous terms.

Annette Kuhn makes few claims herself for breaking new ground. Her book rather contains an ordering of knowledge, a catch-me-up, for those whose mind was elsewhere during the last ten years of thinking about women and film. It has a good bibliography if you might wish to pursue that knowledge in English in more detail and a simplified explanation for those (not unusual in this often difficult field) who may have followed the debates but understood little (it provides a glossary). Annette Kuhn is a synthesizer and vulgarizer in the positive, French sense of "attempting to make knowledge popular." She is a feminist who rationalizes for other feminists the value and necessity of intervention in cinema and who denies the separation of analysis and intervention. She calls for a common front of theory and practice:

"This book could only be written because conditions now seem to exist for feminist film criticism and feminist filmmaking to share some common concerns and goals" (p. x) (1).

And she argues that her own style of analytic intervention finds justification in the women's movement's perennial insistence on the significance of representations of women.

Writing a book subtitled "Feminism and Cinema" involves choices. Over the years, one of the lessons taught by the politically conscious in the women's movement has been to identify who you are and where your ideas are coming from. In this sense Annette Kuhn establishes significant definitions. "Feminism" she defines "very broadly" as

"a set of political practices founded in analyses of the social/historical position of women as subordinated, oppressed or exploited either within dominant modes of production (such as capitalism) and/or by the social relations of patriarchy or male domination" (p. 4).

As for analysis as "cultural intervention," Kuhn embraces the British (*Screen* magazine's) brand of film theory which privileges "an examination of the operation of specifically cinematic signifiers, and also of elements of plot, characterization and narrative structure" which the initial ("American") approach does address in its "surface reading" of image and role (pp. 6-7). The U.S. approach was not devoid of analysis as others have insisted, she later explains. It, too, was based on theoretical and methodological presuppositions; however, presuppositions were not discussed openly in the critical work. Nevertheless, she adds magnanimously, some Americans have become serious film scholars, as with the *Camera Obscura* collective.

Kuhn seems nonetheless uncomfortable with an undiscerning "liberal" radicalness she finds in many of her fellow countrymen and women and their French mentors. She seems sufficiently embarrassed by the demands more orthodox Marxist-feminists might make for considering the autonomy of ideological representations relative to economic and historical factors so as to insist on "contextualizing" discussion of film "texts." Texts, she says, should be situated in relation to the "cinematic apparatus" — the

"various aspects of the institutions historically surrounding the production, distribution and exhibition of films of different types."

This contextualizing, however, is found both in these orthodox Marxist forms of criticism as well as in less materialist ones in *Women's Pictures* itself. Kuhn, following Louis Althusser, insists that

"interventions within culture have some *independent* potential to transform sex/gender systems" (p. 5, my emphasis).

Ever since Althusser (whom Kuhn does not mention in a curious non-contextualization of her own sources) redefined ideology, a critic can make a little revolution wherever s/he is. I will insist more on this issue

of contextualization later, since Kuhn has made it the criterion which distinguishes her work from that of others.

She begins with a preliminary orthodox examination of the dominant cinema as an economic and social institution. Cinema is a commodity, she says, "both as reels of celluloid and as bearers of meanings" (p. 23) which can now be bought directly as videocassettes. As a social institution, since the 1950s cinema has broken down, offering new areas for feminist film production to insert itself. Kuhn then proceeds to explain current trends in general film theory so as to analyze dominant cinema — feminist criticism's traditional target. She studies film "texts" while explaining the specialized vocabulary of semiotics and structuralism and their premises.

"The textual model for dominant cinema is the 'classic realist text,' a type of film text organized around both a certain kind of narrative structure, and a specific discourse or set of signifiers, which becomes the vehicle of the narrative, the means by which the story is told" (p. 28).

She bases her choice of semiotics and structuralism on the serious potential of these methodologies:

"The productivity of textual analysis arises from the fact that it is premised on a notion of film as a dynamic process of meaning construction ... Simply by laying bare the process by which [the social meaning] operates in actual films, a feminist textual analysis may inaugurate a deconstruction of patriarchal ideology" (p. 81).

She chooses the methods of semiotics and structuralism because they can demonstrate these issues:

"What functions does a woman character perform within the film's narrative? How are women represented visually? Are certain fixed images of women being appealed to, and if so how are they constructed through the film's image and/or narrative? How do women not function, how are they not represented in the film?" (p. 81)

Kuhn's explanation of semiotics and structuralism refers to the same films that have become staples of film analysis — MILDRED PIERCE and THE BIG SLEEP. She later adds YOUNG MR. LINCOLN and PSYCHO as she expands the discussion on textual analysis into ideological analysis using psychoanalysis. She thus adds Jacques Lacan's interpretation of psychoanalytic functions to her selection of methodologies. She values Lacan's interpretation of psychoanalysis, she explains, because it addresses film's reception:

"We are faced not with a concrete and self-contained textual body, but with a series of dynamic textual operations and relations which become fixed only in the moment of reading"

(p. 43).

The psychoanalytic approach, she argues, extends textual analysis to reintroduce film's context. Where one can draw an analogy between the filmic state, dreaming and unconscious language, "between dream thought and cinematic address ... work on the cinematic apparatus is an extension of the work on cinematic enunciation" (pp. 56-57). In an expanded definition of contextualization, she now comes to include in the cinematic apparatus "the entire context, structure and *system of meaning production*" (p. 56, my emphasis).

But why would a feminist bother with such methodologies? An understanding of the psychoanalytic modes is a

"useful, even an essential precondition ... to consider the place of woman — as representation and as viewing subject — within the apparatus of dominant cinema, and also (and consequently) to move towards an understanding of how modes of subjectivity other than those privileged by dominant cinema might be set into play" (p. 59).

Kuhn is careful to pose at every opportunity those questions which anchor the relevance of her discussions to the project of feminist intervention in culture. One still, however, might pause and question. Hasn't Kuhn been around? Is she ignorant of the fact that psychoanalysis, concepts of absent penises, phallic replacements and Oedipus complexes are not universally warmly accepted by feminists? Wasn't she taken by Susan Lurie's wonderfully provocative counter-interpretation of the Oedipus complex?[\(2\)](#) Didn't she read Julia Lesage's condemnation of the implications of Freudian theory for women?[\(3\)](#)

With an amazing capacity for academic accountability, Kuhn acknowledges and anticipates objections. She counters that woman's "lack," as psychoanalysis terms it, may be interpreted positively rather than negatively so as to posit instead woman's privileged place in relation to verbal and cinematic language. She offers Luce Irigaray's suggestion that the two vaginal lips signify a "non-fixity of meaning and subjectivity, as against the coherence and apparent wholeness of subjectivity" implied by the monolithic phallus (p. 65). Earlier, Kuhn indicated that cinesemiotics as a method had been transformed as feminists appropriated it for feminist film theory (pp. 71-72). Although she doesn't suggest that the same transformation has actually taken place in psychoanalytic textual analysis, she indicates that feminists are opening the field by asking new questions. She cites Laura Mulvey for contributing an important question — the

"ways in which spectators of narrative film are positioned by representations of women, in terms of how spectator-text relations are mobilized in a series of looks which evoke early, even infantile, forms of pleasure and unpleasure."

Now, she says, a feminist perspective in psychoanalytic textual analysis

must be extended into

"a consideration of the question of whether or in what specific ways the gendered subjectivity of spectators may inform these relations of looking" (pp. 79-80).

Kuhn adroitly skirts the problem: "Whose methodology? Feminism, she argues, offers not so much a methodology as a perspective. While feminist film theory may have advocated adopting a methodology that emerges from within the feminist perspective, it has rather "tended to adopt or appropriate methodologies developed outside of the sphere of feminism itself"(71). If we thus employ feminism as a perspective, what we see through our feminist spectacles "informs what we choose to analyse, and perhaps also to some extent how we choose to analyse it" (p. 70). Feminism is not a unitary perspective, she admits.

"The directions taken up to now by feminist film theory and the directions potentially available to it are two rather different matters" (p. 70).

She says that the appropriated methodologies have been sociologically-based methods, in the initial U.S. approach. Or, in the British case, film-theory-based methods were premised on a notion of representation that does not necessarily reflect the position of women in the "real" world. She does not find these different tendencies in feminist film theory as resulting from a self-conscious espousal of any particular brand(s) of feminism:

"Such differences in feminist perspective as do exist tend to be implicit and discernible only after the fact" (p. 72).

But after so carefully setting up the situation, Kuhn does not then contextualize the discussion. She does not explain how in various countries differences have occurred which might influence future choices. She does not explore what potential directions feminist film theory might take other than espousing those methods indicated above; nor does she explore the current body of feminist thinking to find less patriarchal models. In this sense, Kuhn's investigations of the work of Luce Irigaray are asides to her main focus.

In her concern for solidarity, for a marriage between the two sides of the Atlantic, she actually denies that a real split ever existed: The broadly based concern of most kinds of feminist film theory, she says, has tended to focus "on the silences of film 'texts' in relation to women." The task is to become "sensitive to what often goes unnoticed, becomes naturalized, or is taken for granted within a sexist society" (p. 73). The call to unity becomes then the justification to return to her presentation of semiotic analysis and to "deconstruct" film texts to discover how they construct women through images and narrative structure. Kuhn takes up the debate on "readings," how a reading changes the text, and of whether it is significant that a text is already "cracked" ideologically or whether it operates "fully within the dominant ideology" (p. 86).

A return to these questions is welcomed because the readings offer tantalizing ways for looking at and reappropriating dominant cinema's films and thus for rewriting film history. But these readings also serve to skirt major issues involved in choosing methodologies: First, in a defense of methodologies that proves their efficacy — or for that matter in any current feminist criticism — do we stack the cards? Do we find what we are looking for? Is the methodology proven worthy because it proves what we know to be there? Do we lose the ability to imagine other possibilities? Kuhn asks questions that textual analysis might answer. But she has the answers four pages before she asks the question:

"Woman is constructed as eternal, mythical and unchanging, an essence or a set of fixed images and meanings" (p. 77).

Could we find it to be otherwise?

Second, what possibilities are lost in following a critical methodology that insists on "deconstruction"? What can women create positively as women filmmakers without measuring themselves against patriarchal examples? What opportunities are available for feminist expression other than being "in self-conceived opposition" to dominant cinema?

In this moment of theoretical slippage from neutral to advocate, and in the discussion of experiments by women filmmakers that follows, Kuhn appears to minimize women's contributions to cinema if those contributions fall outside of her category of "deconstruction" and "counter cinema." The feminist creation of a particular style of autobiographical documentary seems less significant, for example, than a film that deconstructs the autobiographical form (DAUGHTER RITE, pp. 171-172). Interventions by women within the guidelines of dominant cinema appear to hold less potential than counter cinema, which is seen in the private arena by small audiences and buoyed up by discussions and writing. She advocates guerilla warfare.

All examples Kuhn finds of feminine language — of positive relations to cinematic signification (her examples are somewhat unclear as to why they are positive) — are counter cinema examples. Nowhere does Kuhn mention the work of creative feminists within the system. No mention of the work of Liliana Cavani, Jutta Brückner, Margarethe von Trotta, Marta Meszaros, or a host of others. Chantal Akerman's JEANNE DIELMAN is only seen in its marginality; the Belgian filmmaker's attempts to work in mainstream cinema are ignored. The emotions evoked by the screen, even new ones, it appears, are best when distanced. Their novelty cannot just lie in their simply being "our" emotions.[\(4\)](#)

Annette Kuhn attempts to be up-to-date and to marry her concern for contextual analysis with the contemporary issue of pornography. In the chapter entitled, "The Body in the Machine," she tries to show how some film texts categorized or not categorized as pornography shed light on

their institutional, social and historical contexts. But here her efforts seem feeble. She sifts through a long preamble of definitions in a language noticeably filled with, "It seems safe to say," "It may," and "It might." Finally she says little new. Meanwhile, she does not discuss how mainstream women's films other than those categorized as pornography are marginalized. Similarly, Kuhn passes over the opportunity to situate her own textual readings in contextual terms.

Offering a balance of interpretations of CHRISTOPHER STRONG, she explains that a text may open itself up to multiple readings because "certain meanings ... can be got from the films by a situated reading made at a particular historical moment." Therefore,

"the apparently inevitable, but ultimately unanswerable question of whether or not the original audiences for the [ruptured] films read them as critiques of patriarchal ideology then becomes unanswerable" (p. 94).

Does Kuhn condemn investigations of the historical conditions of production and audience reception in favor of an ever present reading, conditioned by ever present readers with no apparent concern for why they read as they do? How would Kuhn analyze in detail the current films of the dominant cinema, which her predecessors and thus Kuhn tend not to investigate? Would more investigation prove that some readings were not only "privileged" but also correct? Kuhn's caution to materialize film criticism finally becomes a vague standard. The vagueness seems to arise out of conflicting notions of historicity that Kuhn leaves unexplored.

Is *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* the textbook for courses in women and film we've been waiting for? Ultimately, I think not. Kuhn's discussion of film theory and filmmaking practices offers one of the most thorough set of guidelines for thinking about film I have encountered, but she also closes discussion. While a book called *Women's Pictures* should open endless doors, Kuhn's book, despite its enumeration of possibilities, feels closed. It talks about what has been done, to the neglect of what may yet be explored.

The book addresses a specific theoretical spectrum in a language which I predict today's students will still find difficult. (The often-imprecise illustrations do little to illuminate her points.) And though Kuhn claims that British feminist film theory, unlike its U.S. counterpart, exists outside the institutions of academia and thus has more of an impact on everyday women (and thus raises the significant question of feminist intervention), I think her volume will not find ready acceptance in the community. This is not to denigrate the importance of what she says, but rather to say that what Kuhn attempts could be said still more simply, more engagingly, less cautiously or academically (with the academy's tiresome necessity to summarize all debates), and more assertively.

On the other side of the coin, Kuhn's definitions are clean and for the

most part original. She carefully delineates dominant cinema, New Hollywood cinema, counter cinema, avant-garde cinema, feminist cinema and feminine cinematic writing. Thus she corrects the frequent mistake of lumping together all modernist techniques as progressive. Her discussion of realism includes Socialist Realism, an area often ignored in feminist aesthetic discussions (although I would have liked her to suggest examples other than the overused SALT OF THE EARTH).

But her discussion of documentary realism – “direct cinema” she calls it – discloses theoretical holes. Women's efforts in documentary, she asserts, have been unusual for their characteristic autobiography, non-neutral observation and influence on the subjects themselves. However, she would not have found such characteristics unusual if she had (as she indicates is possible in her footnotes) distinguished the U.S. style of “cinema verite” from the “cinema direct” developed in France and Quebec. What women's documentary has in common with these latter examples is its political purpose. Like the subjects of Quebec's cinema-direct movement, the oppressed subjects of feminist documentary were given a voice by filmmakers who identified with their subjects' oppression. Kuhn misses an opportunity for a contextual analysis that would identify a trend in feminist filmmaking from a class standpoint rather than a purely gender standpoint.

This brings up another potential direction for Kuhn's investigations: the relation between feminist and third-world aesthetics. Within such a perspective, would “feminine” as Kuhn defines it be gender determined or power determined? Is an anti-monolithic style of signification related more to one's position in the power structure, or is it gender specific? And, in the same vein, as Kuhn herself warns, does textual analysis which is excessively formalistic run the risk of making us, in Christine's Gledhill's words, “lose the ability to deal with its relationship to women as defined in society?” (p. 83) Kuhn's own attempts at contextualization don't prove the contrary.

Notes

[1.](#) Unless otherwise indicated, all page numbers shown for quotations refer to *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*.

[2.](#) Lurie, Susan, “Pornography and the Dread of Women: The Male Sexual Dilemma,” in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980), pp. 159-173.

[3.](#) Lesage, Julia, “The Human Subject — You, He, or Me? Or the Case of the Missing Penis,” *Screen*, 16, No. 2, 77-83. Originally published in JUMP CUT, No. 4 (November/December 1974).

[4.](#) Here, as in other areas, Kuhn does not sufficiently credit Bertolt Brecht. Long before he proposed guidelines useful for describing counter cinema. In particular, a Brechtian notion would be that

deconstructive cinema, if it defines itself in relation to dominant cinema, is not a static entity.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Women and Film

Writing in the margins

by Sarah Halprin

(formerly Barbara Halpern Martineau)

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E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, New York: Methuen, 1983. 260 pp. \$17.95; \$9.95, paper.

"This book is being written at a time when we have behind us about ten years of feminist film criticism. This criticism evolved directly out of the women's movement and its preoccupations in the early 1970s and, quite naturally, began with a sociological, political methodology. As the inadequacies of this approach became clear, feminists began to use structuralism, psychoanalysis, and semiology in their theoretical analysis ... Obviously, the field of feminist film theory and criticism will continue to expand in the 1980's. I hope that this book will aid in that expansion by bringing together, situating, and developing ideas that have emerged over the past decade and that provide the starting point for any new work. I hope that teachers unfamiliar with feminist approaches to film will be inspired to undertake courses on women in film, or to build the perspective into their current courses. Finally, I hope that the book will reach students at all levels, for it is they, after all, who will build on the work already done." — Preface to *Women and Film*

Now in the third year of the second decade of the second wave of feminism, two new books about feminism and film appear. Because film books go out of print almost instantly, and because some of the important early articles on feminism and film appeared in no-longer-living periodicals, it is easy to lose sight of our brief history. On this score, both books offer persuasive but limited accounts of what has gone before. Both Ann Kaplan and Annette Kuhn construct historical accounts of feminist film criticism which begin with the U.S.-based "sociological" approach to films, which they see as laudable for its good intentions but hopelessly inadequate to deal with crucial questions of

cinematic specificity. Neither Kaplan nor Kuhn specifies who these well-intentioned but incompetent beginners were (Molly Haskell? Joan Mellen? Marjorie Rosen? Beverly Houston and Marsha Kinder? Ruth McCormick?). But it is quite clear who the intervening heroes were, namely the structural-semiotic-psychoanalytic women associated with the English publication *Screen* in the mid-1970s, particularly Claire Johnston and Laura Mulvey. Heavily influenced by Barthes, Freud, Lacan, Metz, Wollen, and the boys of the *Cahiers du cinéma* school, these women constructed the grammar for subsequent theorists of feminism and film in England and the United States (and, more recently, in Canada and elsewhere). Although both Kaplan and Kuhn show traces of rebellion against their heroic mothers, both make it clear that theirs is the central, mainstream direction of English-language feminist film theory and criticism, and that any other work is at best peripheral, worthy of passing mention if it can be used to support the mainstream.

And so commences a familiar story. A narrative pattern is established. One begins with a definition of terms and a brief history of the sociology to semiology progression of the field. Then one gets right into analyzing the dominant discourse of Hollywood cinema, concentrating primarily on the notions of images of women as spectacle and as fetishized object of a dominant, i.e., male, gaze. Half a book or so later, one looks at the possibility of feminist alternatives. Socialist realism and feminist documentary are dutifully discussed and seen as laudable, especially when they depict poor and/or Third World women, but ultimately dismissed as dangerous because of the "sociological trap" they represent. The major sin in this version of film aesthetics is transparency, or not being self-reflective and avant-garde. Both books also consider one example of a Third World feminist film, Sara Gomez's *ONE WAY OR ANOTHER*, and report that it is very interesting and exciting and perhaps points to all sorts of non-capitalist possibilities.

At this point Kaplan diverges from Kuhn, and considers two European feature films by women, Marguerite Duras' *NATHALIE GRANGER* and Margarethe von Trotta's *MARIANNE AND JULIANE*. (Kuhn's innovation is a chapter on how to analyze pornography from a feminist, post-structuralist perspective. She includes three examples of "soft porn": Nelly Kaplan's *NEA* (which hardly seems encompassed by the term), *RAPE OF LOVE* by the French woman director Yannick Bellon, and *DRESSED TO KILL* by Brian de Palma.) Kaplan finds the two European films fascinating but problematic.

She turns, like Kuhn, with evident relief, to the only really acceptable alternative to Hollywood (which certainly has its charms for these critics), the notion of "feminist counter-cinema" as initially mapped out by Claire Johnston and as exemplified in the film work of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. In addition to the Mulvey/Wollen films, Yvonne Rainer's *LIVES OF PERFORMERS*, the English theory-based film by Sally Potter, *THRILLER*, and Michelle Citron's *DAUGHTER RITE* are examined in some detail by both Kaplan and Kuhn as examples of

feminist counter-cinema. Both books conclude with remarks about contexts of production and distribution for feminist counter-cinema, and Kaplan brings to narrative completion a theme she has been developing throughout her book, about the importance of the theme of mothering for feminist filmmakers and critics.

More so than Annette Kuhn, who focuses on presenting a lucid account of the development and present state of U.K.-based poststructural feminist film criticism, Ann Kaplan offers a number of interesting points of possible divergence from the mainstream. In doing so, she offers glimpses to the careful reader a fact that Kuhn's book is more successful in screening from view (pun intended). That is, what this criticism has constructed is no more nor less than a dominant discourse of "feminist film criticism and theory." It is now a discourse which erases or relegates to the margins work not conceived or constructed within that discourse.

Perhaps because she is situated in the U.S. and therefore more vulnerable than the English-based Kuhn to the criticism of U.S. feminists, Ann Kaplan is careful to take note of the recurrent indications of other directions open to feminist film critics. In conjunction with this tendency, she also seems more aware than Kuhn of some basic weaknesses in the school of criticism which she nevertheless clings to as providing the only coherent, codified set of rules around.

I think both Kuhn and Kaplan have written books of interest to feminists and film theorists. Even with all the similarities and overlappings, each makes a distinctive contribution worth reading and considering. I also think that both books, the only books published recently on the subject, present a serious danger if taken at face value, as representing the central and most important work in feminist film theory and criticism, since they both are aimed at an audience not previously familiar with the field.

"Women, in being relegated to absence, silence, and marginality, have thereby also to a degree been relegated to the outskirts of historical discourse, if not to a position totally outside of history (and of culture) ..."

There is nothing like a mainstream to bring out the marginalism in this critic. Consequently my approach to Ann Kaplan's book, the one I was asked to review, is, literally, to write in the margins, to reintroduce an alternative discourse to her dominant discourse, and to take issue with her precisely at those points where her discourse is weakest from internal pressure, where it threatens, as Claire Johnston says of certain Hollywood films, to crack itself open from within.

My memories of the beginnings of feminist film criticism go back further than Kaplan's "about ten years" (written in January 1983). Women did take issue — often in conversation, sometimes in print in local and progressive publications — about films' sexual politics. Violent misogyny in *STRAW DOGS* and *CLOCKWORK ORANGE* did not go unnoticed.

And Bergman and Fellini's portrayals of women were certainly open to varied discussion. Many women reviewers remarked on the wave of male buddy films. People familiar with the North American experimental scene and the history of animation could name more than a handful of women filmmakers.

In the winter of 1971-72 *Film Library Quarterly* and *Take One*, a now defunct Canadian film magazine, published special issues on women and film. Both carried articles describing recent films made by women in specifically cinematic terms, as well as in terms of the kinds of roles played by women actors and their connections with "real" women's lives. There was also a strong interest in documenting a newly discovered history of women's filmmaking, going right back to the earliest days of cinema.

Regina Cornwell wrote an article for *Film Library Quarterly* on the work of Maya Deren and Germaine Dulac within the history of avant-garde cinema. This study provided a springboard for more extended analyses of the work of both of these important and influential women directors. While not specifically situating her discussion in a feminist context, Cornwell clearly establishes the feminist background of Dulac, who "began her career as a writer for *La Française* in 1909 and later for *La Fronde*, both feminist journals." Cornwall also speculates "whether it was her strong belief in the postulates of feminism which gave her the courage to launch her own film company in 1915." Elsewhere in the article Cornwell describes Dulac's strong interest in experimenting with cinematic technique, and refers to, in *THE SMILING MADAME BEUDET*, DuLac's

"psychological probing through the visualization of what could not be spoken and of what Dulac explicitly did not want to convey in the conventional subtitles ..."

Eleven years later, Kaplan writes in *Women and Film* that Dulac was "not feminist in our contemporary sense," because "there was no full-fledged movement in France and no specific attention to feminism in relation to representation." In addition, Kaplan writes:

"While not exactly a feminist film, *THE SMILING MADAME BEUDET* uses surrealist techniques to present the inner pain and wish fulfillment fantasies of a wife suffocating in a provincial marriage. While for much of the film, M. Beudet is seen as a vulgar, insensitive man, he is not *per se* the enemy: Dulac rather sees the entire institution of bourgeois marriage that the couple are locked into as at fault. In some ways M. Beudet is as much a victim as his wife. Nevertheless, the presentation of things from the wife's perspective was innovative in a cinema that largely reflected male positions ..."

One might conclude that Kaplan believes that there is only one "feminism," which can be specified "exactly," and that it rests on

identification of men as "the enemy."

Kaplan goes on to contrast Dulac and Deren:

"While Dulac works in a quiet, poetic manner, Deren's films are shocking, forceful, violent."

Later,

"Von Trotta's realism is, correspondingly, as harsh and relentless as Duras' is soft and poetic."

Presumably, then, poetry is opposed to violence, harshness, force; it is quiet and gentle. Kaplan's history is shaky here and elsewhere in her book, as is her aesthetic judgment, which seems to be based on some unarticulated moral sense rather than on any clearly defined categories. Again, on Michelle Citron's DAUGHTER RITE:

"I do not think the film itself takes the position of the critical daughters, just because they are the narrators and speakers: *as I tried to show*, the position of the mother emerges through her very repression in the discourse of the film, so that by the end the spectator is *inevitably* on her side."
(italics mine)

Yet many women viewers of the film do report siding with the daughters. And some are critical of it for supposedly trashing the mother. Should we say these women are wrong? Or is the film perhaps open to multiple interpretation?

What are Kaplan's categories?

"For the benefit of readers new to current film theory, I have listed below definitions of terms, concepts, and theoretical models that are used frequently throughout this book and are central to the theoretical arguments being developed. *Readers already familiar with current theory should move on to chapter 1.*" (my italics)

I.e., what follows is unquestionable, part of "current theory," therefore, of "knowledge." This is part of what follows:

"The sociological approach was the one the early feminist film critics used, and it continues to be an important method. Concepts such as the distinction made between the domestic (private) sphere of the home, where the wife and/or mother is positioned, and the work (public) sphere, where the husband belongs, are useful but limited. They do not tell us how meaning is produced in film, and tend to blur distinctions between the realm of lived experience and that of representation (images on film)."

"Semiology, applied to film, attempts to explain how film

communicates, how its meaning is produced in a manner analogous to the way a sentence in written language communicates meaning.”

Because Kaplan does not specify who these "early feminist film critics" were, it is difficult to argue with her assertion. Nevertheless, looking back over early issues of *Women and Film*, the California magazine which began publication in 1972, I find nothing like the sociological monolith Kaplan infers. Instead, there is a range of approaches, many of which share the position that there are important connections (rather than blurring distinctions) between “the realm of lived experience” and “that of representation.” The first issue of *Women and Film* carried an editorial statement:

“The women in this magazine, as part of the women's movement, are aware of the political, psychological, social and economic oppression of women. The struggle begins on all fronts and we are taking up the struggle with women's image in film and women's roles in the film industry.”

And the editors of *Women and Film* sought out articles, reviews, festival reports, news of new work and work-in-progress, with a particular concern for Third World film, issues of race and class in women's lives, and grass roots media productions.

In a later issue of *Women & Film*, Julia Lesage outlined the premises for a feminist film criticism which is multidisciplinary, politically responsible, and cinematically specific ("Feminist Film Criticism: Theory and Practice," 1974):

“In order to write effectively and to give her readers, especially women readers, a way to evaluate cinema themselves, the feminist film critic must work out for herself a theoretical framework to encompass the whole range of issues related to film. Her theory governs what she says to what readership, what aspects of films she will write about, what effects she hopes to gain from her criticism. A good theory includes an explanation of the mechanisms operating *within* the film (form, content, etc.) and the mechanisms that go beyond the product that is the film (such as the film industry, distribution, audience expectation, etc.)”

Lesage goes on to describe a schema of the "total process" of film, "from its inception to its reception by an audience," a schema developed with Chuck Kleinhans, which seems much more useful and logically coherent than the following distinction proposed nine years later by Kaplan:

“CINEMATIC VERSUS THE EXTRA-CINEMATIC”

“Keeping this distinction clearly in mind prevents us from falling into the trap of sociological critics, and linking screen image and lived experience too simplistically. (a) The *cinematic* refers to all that goes on

the screen and to what happens between screen image and spectator (what results from the cinematic apparatus). (b) The *extra-cinematic* refers to discussion about, for example:

1. "the lives of the director, stars, producers, etc.
2. the production of the film in Hollywood, as an institution,
3. the politics of the period when a film was made, and
4. the cultural assumptions at the time the film was made."

What makes "what happens between screen image and spectator" cinematic, but not what happens between filmmaker and screen images? Can "what results from the cinematic apparatus" be separated from the spectator's life? If so, how? If not, why is the director's life less relevant? For instance, most discussions of Dorothy Arzner's films, especially those by the English school, carefully avoid any mention of Arzner's appearance in relation to some of the images in her films. Lengthy analyses of *DANCE, GIRL, DANCE* ignore the fact that while the "main" characters, Judy and Bubbles, are recurrently placed as immature within the context of the film, there are two "minor" characters who both dress and look remarkably similar to Arzner herself (i.e., tailored, "mannish," in the manner of Radclyffe Hall and other famous lesbians of the time). The film places these characters as mature, single, independent women. They are crucial to the career of young Judy and are clearly seen as oppressed by social stereotyping, of which they are contemptuous. Such a reading provides a whole new way of relating to the film and to other Arzner films, encouraging a discussion of lesbian stereotypes, relations between lesbians and heterosexual women as presented in various films and as perceived by any specific contemporary audience.

My own work in feminist film has been different from the Kaplan-Kuhn orthodoxy. From the early 70s on, I have researched and written primarily on films made by women on the assumption that one of the first tasks of feminist criticism is to find our history and examine the broad range of contemporary work. When I've written on commercial cinema by men, generally it's been for the feminist press. And I've made several films and worked with women on several. I've also attended many women's film festivals and events and met many different women media makers in the process: in commercial and noncommercial areas, struggling within guilds, unions and bureaucracies, teaching in high schools and community colleges, working in distribution and exhibition, and with lots of women who just love to go to the movies. And taught, lectured, conferences, festivalled, panelled, and so forth, maintaining a critical stance to the university, especially when working in one. From this experience I've found excitement, energy, and a broad range of experience, taste, activity, and creative work among women. But I sense little of that in the English group, which, instead of looking at women's work seems to be looking over its shoulder at the male academic gaze for approval.

What Kaplan's, and Kuhn's, and Johnston's and Mulvey's critical

discourse has done has been consistently to deny the value of exploring and validating the various and multi-faceted contributions of women past and present, to cinema and criticism, in terms of the real needs of women now. These critics insist instead on a rigidly determined pattern of assessment and reassessment of the same old Hollywood films, followed by valorization of a handful of women's films which are deemed acceptable because they fit a narrow definition of "feminist counter cinema." For example, in 1973 Claire Johnston declared (actually in direct opposition to my work on Agnes Varda's films) that

"our objectification cannot be overcome simply by examining it artistically. It can only be challenged by developing the means to interrogate the male, bourgeois cinema."

The result of this dictum has been to validate analyzing Hollywood cinema as the prime task for aspiring young feminist academics (with some attention allowed to a remarkably small range of women's experimental work which easily fits into the high-art gallery scene). Implicitly, such a project assumes that we women have to pay attention to men's institutions rather than women's accomplishments, rebellions, and resistance to the dominant order. It assumes we have to be like men, speak in their recently fashionable Lacanian psychoanalytic way and not threaten their egos and priorities. It assumes that looking at women's creative work is "ghettoization," when it's men who maintain our marginalization by not taking women's work seriously. It assumes that knowledge comes out of academic theory and couldn't possibly exist in the media work and political practice of the women's movement and feminist art. It assumes there are no problems with existing academic institutions and that disciplinary specialization, denial of activism, and increasing professionalism represent progress. Taken together these assumptions amount to a fashionable ideological version of the "dress for success" suit for the aspiring career woman.

Ten years later, in 1983, Kaplan writes, about feminist critics who have questioned the validity of this approach:

"... for Lesage, the Lacanian framework establishes 'a discourse which is totally male.' And Ruby Rich objected to theories that rest with the apparent elimination of women from both screen and audience. She asked how we can move beyond our placing, rather than just analyzing it ..."

Initially suggesting that Lesage and Rich lead in a "fruitful direction" (but ignoring that direction), 109 pages later Kaplan refutes them, without saying so explicitly (just as she appears to respect sociological methods, then refers to the 'sociological trap"):

"We need films that will show us, once we have mastered (i.e. understood fully) the existing discourses that oppress us, how we stand in a different position in relation to those discourses. Knowledge is, in that sense, power. We need to know how to manipulate the recognized, dominating

discourses so as to begin to free ourselves *through* rather than beyond them (for what is there 'beyond')."

What, indeed, is there "beyond" the vicious circle of Hollywood oppression and semi psychological counter-oppression? Kaplan not only offers no way out, she seals the circle:

"Any attempts at subjectivity must be at the cost of fulfilling desire, since, as Jacqueline Rose notes, to be subject and to own the desire is impossible for women."

Apparently lesbians and bisexual women do not exist. HOWEVER, remember that Kaplan is dutiful about recording some of her opposition:

"The theoretical position that focuses on the impossibility of knowing what the feminine might be outside of patriarchal constructions has been criticized by American lesbian women who see such theorizing as perpetuating male domination. They see women identified women, and female bonding, as ways of circumventing patriarchal domination. Lesbian filmmakers present female images that depart radically from representations in the dominant cinema, offering another kind of alternative, another theoretical position to those found in the independent films discussed."

Although this other position might be considered important in the light of Kaplan's own arguments, she devotes all of three paragraphs later in the book to a hasty description of some lesbian films, having elsewhere, as we have seen, effectively denied the possibility that such films can function on their own terms. She also ignores the entire issue of representations of lesbians and representations of various forms of female bonding in films not explicitly identified as lesbian, an issue, as Julia Lesage has argued in her article on CELINE AND JULIE GO BOATING (Jump Cut 24/25), of crucial importance to feminists. (Certainly Kaplan is not alone among the English group in being ill at ease with lesbian issues. Mulvey and Wollen's first film, PENTHESILEA, is a remarkably hostile assault on cultural lesbian politics and aesthetics.)

And so Kaplan returns to the main "plot," as I quaintly call it, of her book:

"In order to underscore the innovative, thematic aspects of these films, let me dwell for a moment on the relative lack of attention accorded mother-daughter issues in feminist filmmaking. This lack is part of a general omission on the part of feminists ..."

Ignoring for the moment the large body of literature on the subject of mothering produced by feminists, I wonder why Kaplan ignores the work of Marta Meszaros, who has returned over and over again to the

depiction of mother-daughter issues in her socialist feminist feature films, a major body of work accorded the most passing of references by Kaplan. (Meszaros is lumped together with Andrzej Wajda, Karoly Makk, and Pal Gabor as an Eastern European realist.)

“Here I want to briefly lay out the reasons why a focus on Motherhood is important if women are to move forward ... Motherhood is one of the areas that has been left vague, allowing us to reformulate the position as given, rather than discovering a specificity outside the system we are in. It is a place to start rethinking sex difference, not an end.”

Lest it occur to any of us, as it did to Adrienne Rich, that there is another place to start rethinking sex difference, Kaplan brings us to the gap:

“To what degree are lesbians shaped by their position as Other in a signifying system that has assigned a specific (negative) sign to the 'lesbian'? Can images of women-identified women and of female bonding really subvert patriarchal domination? Can we create representation of such relationships that escape their construction by the dominant order as marginal, ghettoized, co-optable? Or should we view lesbian relationships as we might mother-child bonding, i.e., as one area not colonized by men (at least on the non-symbolic level) and as therefore another possible gap through which to bring change?”

Careful, here, in pointing to a possible gap, she's already sealed off the possibility of genuinely subversive lesbian films. Now she seals off the gap she has apparently opened:

“Because of patriarchy's intricate involvement in heterosexuality, its discourse has been able to control female sexuality, including lesbian relations.”

Has patriarchy's discourse controlled lesbian sexuality? Kaplan makes it sound like a system of total control. Patriarchy has influenced lesbian sexuality. But the lives and experiences of many lesbians give evidence of resistance, individual and collective, to the dominant order. I suggest a careful reading of Lillian Faderman's excellent book, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, for a thorough analysis of ways in which patriarchy has and has not been able to “control female sexuality, including lesbian relations.” Ruby Rich's article on *MAEDCHEN IN UNIFORM* and Michelle Citron's article on Jan Oxenberg's films (both in *jump Cut* 24/25) supply specific cinematic evidence of some possibilities of uncontrolled (gasp!) female sexuality, including lesbian relations.

Lesbians are not the only women marginalized by Kaplan's approach. Again, she indicates awareness of a problem, and then refuses to respond appropriately:

[Speaking of counter-cinema] “The culminating

contradiction is that filmmakers whose whole purpose was to change people's ways of seeing, believing, and behaving have only been able to reach an audience already committed to their values ... Obviously, the way dominant discourses function varies from culture to culture, and a look at these variations might tell us a lot about America and about what strategies might work to achieve greater access to large audiences without severely compromising what we want to say and how we want to say it."

THEREFORE:

"It *seemed* important to look, however briefly and inadequately, at what women directors are able to do in the non-capitalist sphere. (my italics) ... It *seemed* important to include at least one Third World film to show what women are doing in a non-capitalist society: again the choice was difficult, but I finally opted for Sara Gomez's ONE WAY OR ANOTHER (1974)." (my italics)

So, although 4 (four) films by British theorists are given detailed attention (two of these are also discussed by Kuhn, who also discusses ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, and these films have also received considerable attention elsewhere), Kaplan finds room for only one "non-capitalist," "Third World" film. This is racism. It is racism because white middle class professional women like Kaplan and myself have a responsibility and obligation to seek out work by women of color, and if we don't find it easily, to ask why. And to help more of it come into being.

Discussing European work, Kaplan says,

"Before turning to the American scene, I look briefly at films by European women directors who have, for complex reasons, managed to produce narrative feature films while American filmmakers have by and large been limited to the short (mainly documentary) film."

This very simplistic account ignores both shorts, experimental and documentary, by European women, also experimental shorts and features by American women. It totally leaves out Canadian, Quebec, Japanese, Australian, African, Latin American, etc., films by women, sealing off without consideration possible alternatives to the system of dominance and reaction she has set up as all-encompassing.

Kaplan also writes off work by women within the one dominant system she has looked at:

"The few women who have managed to make films in Hollywood in recent years usually turn out to have male connections and do not necessarily make films about women."

I don't know what she means by "male connections" — most women working outside of lesbian separatist communities do have them, including most of the theorists and film makers Kaplan valorizes. While the one woman Kaplan mentions (Claudia Weill) who has worked in Hollywood in recent years is certainly a possible subject for feminist criticism on the basis of a certain degree of homophobia in her work, Weill has clearly made films about women, as have Lee Grant, Goldie Hawn, Jane Fonda, and Martha Coolidge. Simply to write off their work on the basis of an erroneous generalization is as destructive and self-limiting as Claire Johnston's early counter-assertion to my interest in the films of Agnes Varda that they "mark a retrograde step in women's cinema," and thereby, by implication, deserve no further analysis. My own sense is that constructive criticism of as many films by contemporary women as possible is an urgent priority for feminist film criticism. This has not been a priority of the dominant discourse school which has also been the dominant publication and conference school since the demise of Women & Film. Meanwhile, women all over the world continue to make films, feature films, experimental, documentary, animation, overlapping category films, and, in general, critical silence prevails from the "expanding" field of "feminist film criticism." Once again, Kaplan claims much more scope and openness than he in fact demonstrates:

"SCOPE"

"In this second half of the book we have looked at the various ways in which women directors in Europe, America, and the Third World have responded to the Hollywood appropriation of the female image and begun to explore the possibilities for giving woman the voice and, status as subject."

"OPENNESS"

"The problem is how to create a counter-cinema that is accessible to a general audience while not being propagandistic and rhetorical (as are many new left and feminist films) in ways that simply duplicate how bourgeois ideology is communicated. I am not as convinced as the British group that forms so unequivocally carry ideology, and believe that a way out of the dilemma may be to use forms familiar to people in new ways that challenge old concepts, while still permitting people to understand what is going on."

Fortunately, women filmmakers have never been deterred by the absence of useful criticism. They have proceeded to use forms familiar and unfamiliar to people in new ways that challenge old concepts, while still permitting people to understand what is going on. Nell Shipman did this with melodrama, as did Lois Weber. Dulac did it in *THE SMILING MADAME BEUDET* and Sagan did it in *MAEDCHEN IN UNIFORM*. Preobajenskaya with *THE PEASANT WOMEN OF RYAZAN*, Shirley Clarke with *PORTRAIT OF JASON*, Agnes Varda with *LIONS' LOVE*,

Joyce Wieland with *WATER SARK*, *RAT LIFE AND DIET IN NORTH AMERICA*, *SOLIDARITY*, and *THE FAR SHORE*, Mireille Dansereau with *LA VIE REVÉE*, Nelly Kaplan, Marta Meszaros, Liliana Cavani ... Why are these names not familiar wherever courses on women in film are taught, or film series run, or new books published which claim to represent feminist film criticism?

Annette Kuhn makes a valuable suggestion in *Women's Pictures*, that any text can become a feminist text through the process of reading. If this is so, why not take on the double barreled, doubly valuable task of validating women's achievements in cinema at the same time as bringing feminist perspectives to bear on their work? It is the films which are written about which get used in classes and film series, so that prints remain in circulation and are occasionally acquired by archives. I see little need to ensure that *BLONDE VENUS*, *CAMILLE*, *LOOKING FOR MR. GOODBAR*, or *PSYCHO* remain available for film study. On the other hand, many of the films I saw for the first and only time at one or another of the early women's film festivals, in New York, Edinburgh, London, Paris, Chicago, Toronto, films which permanently altered and expanded my own imagination of what cinema could accomplish, remain unavailable to most people. Some have disappeared from sight altogether. Most discouraging of all is the difficulty encountered by women who have made feminist documentary and experimental films and would like to have them reviewed with the care and feminist critical perspective they deserve.

Finally, I believe there is a large and growing audience of women who desire and deserve to have feminist criticism available which offers, as Julia Lesage put it, "a way to evaluate cinema themselves." Semiology and structuralism have certainly provided some very useful tools for this endeavor. *Feminist* theory of psychoanalysis can also be useful, as is feminist theory of sociology, politics, and anthropology. I am more cautious about advocating the usefulness of Lacanian psychology. For example, Laura Mulvey, a critic and filmmaker for whom I have great respect, managed to produce a full length article on *DUEL IN THE SUN*, analyzed in terms of the psychoanalytic positioning of the female spectator to show the impossible dilemma of the female caught between stereotypes. But she never once mentioned the film's deep, pervasive racism, inextricably intertwined with the woman's characterization.

It is time for a more widespread recognition, among those of us who call ourselves feminist film theorists and critics, that the best theory emerges from practice and is designed to be available to practitioners and flexible in response to change. That the purpose of distinguishing between daily life and cinematic representation is to understand better the relations between them. That understanding is the basis of what lies beyond dominant discourse — it begins in the margins and moves, continually, beyond. Here's to the beyond!

Black women filmmakers

by Claudia Springer

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The emergence of university-trained black filmmakers on the West Coast since the late 1960s has included a significant number of women. During the summer of 1982, I met with fifteen black women filmmakers who work in Los Angeles, and I viewed thirteen of their films. All but two of the women were working towards or had received an MFA in motion picture and/or television production at UCLA; one had a BA in art from UCLA; one had received an MFA in cinema production from USC. All of the women spoke about their desire to communicate their ideas about black people's history and experience in film or video, often with an emphasis on women's experience. They differed about the possibility of expressing black concerns in mainstream commercial cinema; while some of the women hoped to gain directing jobs in Hollywood, others resolved to remain independent. This article discusses some of the concerns expressed by the filmmakers in their films and in interviews.

The women I spoke to came to filmmaking from various disciplines. A few had studied filmmaking as undergraduates; others had studied English literature, theatre, art, journalism, sociology, education, French, or creative writing. Many had worked for years at various jobs before entering graduate school. They said they chose filmmaking as a way to express their ideas, to influence or enlighten audiences, and to counteract the damage caused by Hollywood's inadequate treatment of black people.

The African women will become some of the first filmmakers in their countries, where indigenous film production is now developing. They have chosen to study filmmaking for the same reasons as the U.S. women and also to ensure that their countries will see good indigenous film and TV programs rather than the foreign, mainly U.S., products that have dominated their screens.

Graduate film school was given mixed reviews. All the women credited UCLA or USC with teaching them technical skills and providing access to equipment. However, excessive competition for equipment and

damaged equipment hindered them. A more serious charge was leveled by a few women against faculty members in the film departments who sometimes criticize films made from a black perspective. One woman told me,

"If you were going to do a film on something black, some of the instructors would say that you weren't making a universal film, which is really racist."

Several women gave examples of criticisms about their films which indicated that the instructors disliked the subject matter because it was from a black point of view. One woman's film, which has since received acclaim outside of the university, was called "unbelievable" when in fact it portrayed an event familiar to many black people. The white instructor and all-white class would not acknowledge the limited nature of their experiences and preconceived notions or see that there were other ways of perceiving the world than their own. Because her film received a low grade, the filmmaker had to go before a faculty committee in order to continue in the program. As another woman whose film received a similar criticism told me, the message underlying such criticism is this:

"We don't believe what you believe. We don't share your vision."

Black students often find it extremely difficult to make the films they want to make when white instructors and classmates imply that white ideology is universal while black ideology is biased.

Several women made similar observations about instructors' attitudes towards women's issues. One woman commented,

"I was told in school that some of the things I was proposing weren't valuable. Some of those things had to do with women."

Male students often shared this disregard for women's issues. A woman whose first film was about her young son told me that she was not taken seriously afterwards since some men seemed to have labeled her, "the woman who makes films about kids." Another woman said,

"Of course, film school is sexist and racist; it's just a mini-society."

UCLA also was criticized for admitting very few black students into the Ph.D. program in film criticism. I was told that as a result, there are not enough black film critics in Los Angeles and black filmmakers have to rely on white critics to interpret their work, which is problematic because white critics are not entirely familiar with African American culture. In addition to citing the lack of black film critics, some women mentioned the lack of black faculty members in UCLA's School of Theatre Arts. Black filmmakers trained at UCLA, such as Haile Gerima,

Charles Burnett, Ben Caldwell, and Larry Clark, have contributed substantially to the university's reputation by receiving international acclaim for their films, but the faculty's composition does not reflect their contributions. In fact, some of the women believe that the faculty felt threatened by black male students in the late 60s and early 70s and therefore began to accept more black women than men into the graduate program in the mid-70s. Many women mentioned a shift from the mid-70s to the present from predominantly men to predominantly women black students.

The women told me that they often rely on each other for support in order to endure a stressful university environment. From working on each other's films to sharing plans and goals, they provide a mutual sense of community. However, a few women currently on campus said there is less group orientation among black women at UCLA now than in the 1970s, in part because they receive support from other students, both white and black, and do not experience the hostility that many of the first black women students encountered. Several factors may be responsible for the decrease in group cohesion. White students may now be more receptive to studying with black students; few black women are on campus at once since many take leaves of absence or hold jobs while studying; and there is more emphasis on individual work now than there was in the 1960s and 70s when students dedicated themselves to group activity. Nevertheless, many of the black women who met while studying filmmaking continue to work on films together, both before and after receiving their degrees.

All of the women are pursuing careers in film or video production. The main obstacle they face is lack of financial backing for their work. It is extremely difficult for them to finance even their student films and videotapes, most of which cost between \$5,000 and \$12,000. The universities provide some loans; otherwise, projects are completely student financed. (USC, unlike UCLA, does pay for raw film stock and processing.) Many students hold jobs and channel all their earnings into their school film and video projects; as a result, other areas of their lives may suffer. One woman told me that her car had been repossessed, and while working on a film, she would feed her crew but go home and realize she could not afford to feed her family. Like other students in similar straits, she decided to take a leave of absence from the university and spend a longer time completing the MFA.

Financial difficulties continue after students earn their degrees. Some of the women I talked to work at clerical jobs, sometimes with temporary agencies that allow for flexibility when filming or researching a project. Other women use their film and video production skills in freelance work or to work for community centers. Still others work in the film industry, at jobs that do not fulfill their goals but may lead to advancement. They also pursue grants as a way to fund films; some women have received grants that contributed significantly to the production of their films. Others look for sponsors to provide money to complete a film.

Career goals expressed by the women include producing or directing feature length films, teaching filmmaking at the university level while making films, owning a production company, making ethnographic films, writing screenplays, using video in conjunction with international law, and doing "guerilla filmmaking" in the streets. The women voiced varying opinions about whether their proximity to Hollywood could help them achieve their goals. Some women said they had little or no interest in working in the Hollywood industry:

"To work here would be very difficult unless you want to get involved in the commercial aspect of video and film and make very slick, computerized products."

"Los Angeles has a deteriorating effect on artists."

"I'm trying to undo the damage [Hollywood] is doing, to be an alternative, because the images Hollywood is putting out are negative and unreal. They may operate under the premise that it's pure entertainment, which I don't believe. There's no such thing. So I really feel that I'm countering Hollywood."

"I don't feel Hollywood is going to create positive images of black people. They haven't done it historically, and I don't see them doing it presently or in the future, and so that's up to us; we have to do it."

One woman thought that being close to Hollywood helps independent filmmakers because moviegoers in the area who lose interest in commercial "murder and space stories" tend to come to theatres that show independent films.

Other women felt that Hollywood jobs provided them the opportunity to use their film and video production skills, gain experience, make contacts, and perhaps advance into producing or directing jobs. Some told me that they envisioned themselves treating their preferred subjects in films made on the side, separately from any work done for the Hollywood studios. However, other women hoped to make the films they desired within the system, although they were aware of difficulties they might encounter, as indicated by this statement made by a woman who works for a Hollywood studio now:

"I had always heard that politics were so important in Hollywood, but I was not prepared for this, or for the amount of sexism. It's absolutely incredible. The old boys' club is very tight; deals are made on racquetball courts, friendships are established [in restaurants], and decisions are made white water rafting ... It's very difficult for a woman, a black woman, especially someone outside of the Hollywood community, to participate in the kinds of activities that have already been set up. A lot of these boys went to school together, their fathers knew each other or

they served as pages together at NBC before civil rights came in and black people became pages too. These relations form the foundation for commercial products. I think you might be able to permeate that system and then you might be able to be assimilated. But you have to ask whether that's what you want to do. What you have to become in order to do that is not necessarily what you intended to be. You always have to keep sight of why you came here, why you wanted to get involved in the first place. I have yet to answer how I see myself fitting in there."

One of the major reasons that some of the filmmakers want to work within the Hollywood system is to obtain wide distribution for their films, for without a Hollywood company distributing a film, it is extremely difficult to give it national theatrical release. Many of the women told me that they want to reach as many people as possible with their films, and they feel that their films have universal appeal:

"My films will have black characters and deal with concerns of the black community, but they'll be universal since they'll deal with people trying to attain self-fulfillment, with friendship, male-female relations, and growing pains. It's important to visualize myself and my people, so of course I'll use black characters, but it's also important for me to deal with issues important to all of us, whether they're political, emotional, or psychological."

"I want to use the specifics I come out of and be universal as well. I'm interested in reaching as many people as are interested in creating change. Hopefully what I say will be of some kind of value."

"I think you will reach a larger audience with whatever you want to do or say through a commercial vehicle. I hope that what I'll be able to do is present people on the screen who maybe haven't gotten there before, stories, etc. There are lives I've encountered that are worthy of films."

"My films will be just as much for whites as for blacks, like instructional pieces for people who haven't been exposed to us."

"I think it's important for non-blacks people to learn about black heritage."

Some of the women belong to black filmmakers' cooperatives and are using alternative types of distribution; others have distribution companies handling their films. The majority distribute their films themselves since the cost of making multiple prints for distribution companies is prohibitive. Their films have been seen in festivals, schools, universities, libraries, community centers, and on television. Many women told me that they will continue to prioritize black

community organizations in screenings since the black community is their primary audience.

The African women plan to distribute their films theatrically and on television in their countries as well as internationally. Theatres already exist throughout Nigeria and Cameroon, although so far they have been showing U.S. and other foreign films. Anne Ngu told me that if the official censors in Cameroon accept her films, the theatres must screen it; theatre owners cannot reject a film because they fear it will be unprofitable. Distribution in Nigeria is complicated by the diversity of Nigerian cultures and languages, according to Ruby Bell-Gam:

"In Nigeria alone we have hundreds of languages. In some parts of Nigeria, from one town to the next, people don't understand each other's languages. The culture I portray in my film may not apply to all of Nigeria ... Most people in Nigeria understand and speak Pidgin English; so I'd like to make films in Pidgin. It may be the most effective language for communication in Nigeria."

In rural areas without theatres, Bell-Gam told me, there are town halls where films can be shown, as well as more affluent people who might be willing to use their large compounds to show films to the villagers.

Films included in the following discussion are categorized according to the themes of African heritage, black solidarity, black women's experiences, and influential black people. This article is intended to be descriptive rather than analytical. My purpose is to provide exposure to black women filmmakers by describing their work and ideas, and I leave it to others to analyze the films discussed here.

AFRICAN HERITAGE

A number of the films deal with aspects of black Americans' African heritage, and several filmmakers identified this as one of their major interests. African heritage has been a recurrent theme in black arts over the years. As C.W.E. Bigsby writes,

"For the Black American, that past lies distantly and ambiguously in Africa, and for both the First Renaissance, inspired by Richard Wright's *Native Son*, but coming into its own in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, it was a vital world of myth and fact, a crucial key to private and public meaning." (C.W.E. Bigsby, *The Second Black Renaissance: Essays in Black Literature*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980, p. 9.)

A poem by Margaret Danner, "And Through the Caribbean Sea," is cited by Don L. Lee as an example of poetry infused with Africa:

"We, like shades that were first conjured up by an African witch doctor's ire, (indigo for the drum and the smoke of

night, tangerine for the dancing smudged fire) have been forced to exist in a huge kaleidoscope world. We've been shifting with time and sifting through space, at each whimsical turn of the hands that have thrown the Kaleidoscope, until any pattern or place or shade is our own ..." (Margaret Danner in "Toward a Definition: Black Poetry of the Sixties" by Don L. Lee, in *The Black Aesthetic*, edited by Addison Gayle, Jr., New York: New American Library, 1971.)

Africa is an integral part of many black works in all the arts. For example, in prose, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* revolves around the tale of slaves who escaped their bondage by leaping from the fields and flying back to Africa. Examples in painting are Dan Concholar's "Series of Africa #2," and James Lesesne Wells' block print, "African Phantasy."

Films made by African American women who are exploring aspects of their African heritage include YOUR CHILDREN COME BACK TO YOU and A DIFFERENT IMAGE, both by Alile Larkin, VARNETTE'S WORLD: A STUDY OF A YOUNG ARTIST, by Carroll Blue, and FORWARD EVER, by Pamela Jones.

YOUR CHILDREN COME BACK TO YOU has been seen in cities throughout the States and in Paris, Cannes, the Netherlands (on television and in several cities), and England. The film depicts a young black girl's, Tovi's, struggle to choose between two worlds: the material comfort of life with her aunt, who represents conformity to U.S. bourgeois values, and the poverty of her stepmother, who represents Pan-Africanism. Both women want to care for Tovi while her father is a freedom fighter in Africa. Tovi's confusion is expressed when she relates her dream about a country where black people can live freely, but she supposes that the country "would be dirty." After vacillating between the two lifestyles, Tovi learns that her father has been killed and she chooses Pan-Africanism in the hope that black people may have a brighter future.

The film weaves aspects of African heritage into the narrative by including African fabrics and patterns in Tovi's stepmother's home and African tales that Tovi is told. The film is 27 minutes, in 16mm black and white, and has a narrative structure, although it contains more ambiguity than the classical Hollywood narrative. Individual sequences, and the film as a whole, do not end in strong closure. Tovi's struggle to understand the complexities of the adult world are not over-simplified; rather, the film's loose ends indicate that there are no easy answers. As Larkin, who has an MFA from UCLA, told me:

"I want to make images that cause us to examine ourselves and our experiences, the positive and the negative ... I don't want to provide the answer. My films remain open at the end; the problems still exist, and we have to struggle to overcome them, as opposed to a happy ending where you can

go home knowing everything was resolved in the film so you don't really have to deal with it."

A DIFFERENT IMAGE, Larkin's second film, tells the story of Alana, an African American woman who attempts to define herself according to her own standards of beauty, based on African women's styles, rather than on U.S. notions of femininity. Her practical clothing and confident body language are contrasted with images of women as sex objects on billboards and in Playboy magazine. Alana turns to African standards of beauty to free herself from the constraints imposed on U.S. women by rigid codes governing "ladylike" behavior. Alana's nonconformity causes her to be misunderstood by almost everyone, including her best friend, a young man who is unsure how to interpret her behavior.

A montage sequence of African women who appear proud and independent sharpens the contrast with U.S. images of passive women, almost always white, used in advertisements. A DIFFERENT IMAGE is in 16mm color, 51 minutes, and has a narrative structure with unique elements such as a montage sequence of African women with rhythmic and graphic editing that breaks conventions of continuity editing and adds to the film's individuality. Like YOUR CHILDREN COME BACK TO YOU, A DIFFERENT IMAGE is open-ended; the issues raised by the film are not resolved. Larkin has found that audience members frequently want to discuss the film after seeing it, so she has written a discussion guide. A DIFFERENT IMAGE has been screened at Filmex in Los Angeles, where it was named runner-up for best short film of 1982, as well as in several other U.S. and English cities.

African heritage will be explored again in Larkin's next film, ABENA'S WINDOW, part of which will be set in Ghana during the slave trade. Larkin described it as dealing with infertility both literally and as a metaphor for black people's inability to produce in oppressive American society.

VARNETTE'S WORLD: A STUDY OF A YOUNG ARTIST is a documentary about a black woman artist, Varnette Honeywood, who lives and works in Los Angeles. This film was made by Carroll Blue, who has an MFA from UCLA. Honeywood talks about her life and art, including a trip she made to Africa for a convention of black artists. She describes the influence of African art on African American art, particularly in the use of bright colors, which are evident in her own art depicting people and scenes from the black community in wall murals and paintings that joyously affirm childhood playfulness and community cohesion. Honeywood values her trip to Africa for strengthening her understanding of her African heritage and for introducing her to many other black artists. The film is in 16 mm color, 26 minutes long, and is highly polished technically and artistically. Honeywood's voice over describing her life and thoughts accompanies images of her community, while music from the black church and community forms an integral part of the soundtrack. VARNETTE'S WORLD won the Gold Hugo award at the Chicago International Film

Festival in 1979. It has been seen on national television in the United States, England, and Sweden, as well as in screenings in the Netherlands, France, and England.

FORWARD EVER, a work in progress by Pamela Jones, will be a three-part documentary about the historical struggle for Pan-Africanism among black people throughout the world. The first part will show the ancient history of Africa and the early struggle to unify the continent, ending with the European invasions and colonization. The second part documents the efforts of American black people to organize support for Pan-Africanism. The third part will be a perspective on the international struggle to throw off imperialism and class oppression.

Part of the completed footage, shot in 1978, follows a young black organizer for the All-Africa People's Revolutionary Party as he travels through Washington, D.C. urging black people to attend the annual African Liberation Day rally. The film is shot in 16mm black and white. The completed footage is cinema verité combined with documentary footage of civil rights marches and speeches. The cinema verité style and the editing convey the spontaneity involved in grassroots organizing, for the organizer has to adjust his persuasive arguments for everyone he speaks to on the streets, and many are unfamiliar with concepts of Pan-Africanism. His enthusiasm and personal touches make him fascinating to watch.

These four films share a curiosity about and respect for the African side of African American heritage. They indicate ways that Africa continues to be relevant to African Americans, providing role models, artistic inspiration, and hope for a better future for black people throughout the world.

Several other films concerned with African heritage that I was unable to see deserve mention. Mildred "Imelda" Richard's *BEEN HERE BEFORE* is, according to the filmmaker, about different types of white oppression of black people that have prevented black men from communicating with black women over the ages. It moves from 18th century Ghana where black people are kept captive in chains, to a plantation where black men and women are separated by law, to a jazz club in the 1950s where black people are destroyed by drugs, prostitution, and murder, to a semi-documentary in L.A.'s Jefferson High School where the system denies black students access to higher education.

Barbara McCullough's *WATER RITUAL #1: AN URBAN RITE OF PURIFICATION* incorporates African spiritualism and ritual in its poetic treatment of a woman's relationship to her environment. The film has been controversial because it depicts the woman urinating. McCullough explained that the woman symbolizes all Third World people who are displaced in the world and forced to live according to values that are not their own, and the act of urination symbolizes the woman coming to grips with her cultural confusion by dispelling her frustration in order to turn her attention to creating a better society.

Julie Dash's *DIARY OF AN AFRICAN NUN*, based on a short story by Alice Walker, concerns a black nun's conflict over the concept of a white God.

ONE, a dance film by Pamela Jones, deals with an African American dancer who is insecure about her talent and falls during a performance. Through a shift in time and space, she suddenly finds herself in Africa surrounded by a group of women who sing to her and strengthen her. These same women are also African American women in the dancer's audience, who applaud her performance. As Jones told me,

"The same women are repeated in different places in history, culture, time and space. We're all one person in a way."

Jones is currently working on a film about African American coal miners in the 1930s that will draw the link between black miners in South Africa and the United States.

Africa also occupies a central position in three films made by African women studying at UCLA: *AFRICAN WOMAN U.S.A.*, by Ijeoma Iloputaife, *MY CHILD, THEIR CHILD*, by Ruby Bell-Gam, and *LITTLE ONES*, by Anne Ngu.

In her film, Iloputaife, from Nigeria, portrays the narrow-mindedness and abuse encountered by an African woman studying dance at a U.S. university. She receives a long-awaited work permit, but has difficulty finding a job. At a job interview, a white male executive leafs absentmindedly through her portfolio while asking inane questions, such as,

"Wasn't Idi Amin the president of Nigeria?"

He ignores her answers, and finally offers her a job far beneath her qualifications. The sequence captures the insular attitude of many U.S. people who do not try to learn about foreign cultures because they assume they already have sufficient knowledge. The African woman's final abuse occurs when an African American man, who had earlier identified himself as a talent scout offering to further her dancing career, forces his way into her apartment while she is out and rapes her daughter.

Iloputaife described the film as being, at one level, about mistakes made by foreigners because of cultural differences. The American job interviewer shows his ignorance by sticking to preconceived notions about Nigeria. The woman, in turn, trusts the "talent scout" because she assumes that people tell the truth about themselves. When he attacks her daughter, he shows his disregard for their shared heritage; instead of helping his people, he takes advantage of them. Iloputaife drew a parallel to some Third World educated people who, rather than use their education for their people's benefit, work for personal gain at others' expense.

The film contains some complex images and techniques, including a sequence in which the child watches an old Hollywood film about the Biblical story of Lot in which a man rapes a woman. The sequence simultaneously foreshadows the child's fate, indicates the historical pervasiveness of rape, and illustrates Hollywood's glib treatment of the crime. By contrast, the child's rape is brutal and terrifying. The film ends with multiple images of the African woman running down the night street in anger while her screams reverberate. AFRICAN WOMAN, U.S.A. is in 16mm color and 30 minutes long, and has been seen on network television in Nigeria.

MY CHILD, THEIR CHILD was made by Ruby Bell-Gam, another Nigerian woman studying at UCLA. The film offers a fictional story of a woman struggling against unfair child custody customs in Nigeria. Her ex-husband has custody of their young son, whom she can see only on the last day of every month. She defies her ex-husband by bringing her son to her home earlier than the designated day. That evening, she still has her son and defiantly ignores the ringing phone which signals her ex-husband's anger.

MY CHILD, THEIR CHILD is a ten-minute, Super-8 color film with distinctly African qualities. In addition to the fact that it deals with a Nigerian situation and is set in that country, its construction seems influenced by Bell-Gam's culture. African music, for example, plays an active role in the film. As Bell-Gam told me,

"In this film, I tried to use music for expression. We use music a lot in my culture. When my actress cries, you don't hear her cry, but the music is a lament. The Africans who've seen the film like it very much; they say it is very African."

The film, in fact, uses very little dialogue; it communicates with images and music. In addition Bell-Gam cast mostly Africans in the film in order to have characters with African voices and mannerisms which, she told me, are distinct. So even though the film was shot in Los Angeles, it successfully conveys an impression of Africa.

LITTLE ONES was made by Anne Ngu, a woman from Cameroon who is also studying filmmaking at UCLA. The film depicts an African woman's grief after experiencing a stillbirth. The poem on the soundtrack addresses the dead infant, telling how it has hurt its parents by rejecting life; yet they understand its reluctance to enter a world where children are the victims of brutality, starvation, racism, and war. LITTLE ONES (super-8 color, ten minutes) communicates lyrically through the poem, written by the filmmaker's husband, and through expressive images. Personal images, such as the woman's mourning her dead child at its grave, are juxtaposed with still photos of starving, injured, arid dying children from around the world; personal and political issues become entwined. Ngu told me that she envisions the film as important to women who have experienced stillbirths by helping them work through their feelings. She intends to distribute it in Cameroon. Currently, Ngu is working on a videotape about a Cameroonian naming ceremony.

BLACK SOLIDARITY

Many of the films I saw, while they do not concern Africa, nevertheless treat the theme of solidarity among black people. Black nationalism, like Africa, has found recurrent expression in black arts. For example, Margaret Walker's poem, "We Have Been Believers," includes the lines:

"We have been believers believing in our burdens and our demigods too long. Now the needy no longer weep and pray; the long-suffering arise, and our fists bleed against the bars with a strange insistency." (Margaret Walker, "We Have Been Believers" in *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900 to 1960*," by Arthur P. Davis, Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974.)

Several other poets who have written about black solidarity and revolt are Don L. Lee, Sonia Sanchez, Imamu Amiri Baraka, and Nikki Giovanni. An example from the visual arts is a silk screen print by Barbara J. Jones entitled "Your Brother's Keeper," which portrays in vivid black, purple, orange, and yellow, determined black faces, clenched fists, guns, and the words, "Resist law and order in a sick society."

A film that expresses the desire for worldwide black solidarity is by Karen Guyot, who has a B.A. in Art from UCLA. Entitled PAS SI BÔ (Haitian Creole for "not so good"), it uses a montage of still photographs, advertisements, and animation combined with live action footage and emphasizes the discrepancy between the luxurious lives led by tourists in the Bahamas and the lives of the island's inhabitants. Billed as a paradise for tourists, the islands are bleak for their own people. Slick ads for vacations in the Bahamas are juxtaposed with images of poverty; the words, "It's better in the Bahamas," appear three times with increasing irony. A small animated black waiter walks endlessly across the screen while images of tourists relaxing appear behind him. Intermittent black and white still photos show a black woman on the beach tossing her hair back glamorously, but she finally rejects the tourists' superficial lifestyle to run, in color, to the shantytown where the island's black people live. The soundtrack consists of ocean waves, clinking glasses, and party noises that gradually are drowned out by drum beats.

Guyot told me,

"People visiting the islands just see glamour. The woman in the film can be interpreted as a beautiful tourist or as a native who runs back to shantytown. The message is that everyone is in the same situation; the tourists are no better than the poor people, although tourists ignore that reality to live in a fantasy world. If you're a tourist, don't just think that's all there is. You shouldn't just look at the glamorous sections of a town; look at the poverty as well."

The film is in 16mm and three and a half minutes long. Guyot told me that she likes to make short films that come right to the point and that communicate universally with images. PAS SI BÔ has been seen at festivals in New York, Chicago, Michigan, and Los Angeles, where it won honorable mention at the 1982 Black Talkies on Parade festival.

Black people's united stand against police brutality is the theme of Carmen Coustaut's film, JUSTIFIABLE HOMICIDE, and other filmmakers expressed interest in confronting the issue in future films. JUSTIFIABLE HOMICIDE was inspired by, but does not attempt to recreate, an actual incident of police brutality — the Terence Johnson case in Prince George's County, Maryland. Coustaut's film shows two white policemen accost a black teenager who is washing clothes at a laundromat with his brother. They frisk him, taunt him with a knife, and finally point a gun at him while he lies handcuffed on the ground. His brother protects the youth by pulling a gun and shooting the policeman, only to be taken into custody himself. In a show of solidarity, one of a group of black onlookers raises his clenched fist in salute to the arrested youth.

The film is in 16mm black and white, five minutes long. Remarkable for its concise imagery and editing. JUSTIFIABLE HOMICIDE is influenced by Coustaut's training at USC, where she received an MFA in cinema production in 1982. She told me that her filmmaking differs from what she has observed as the UCLA style. At USC, she said, she was given more rigid specifications for films than are students at UCLA. USC emphasizes the dominant narrative style and requires that films be short and tightly structured, while, according to Coustaut, UCLA students, allowed to make longer films, have more room for experimentation and more time to convey their messages. JUSTIFIABLE HOMICIDE has been shown in Chicago, Washington, D.C., Nigeria, and Los Angeles, where it won second place at the Black Talkies on Parade festival in 1982.

Melvonna Ballenger's RAIN offers a poetic portrayal of a young woman's growing political awareness. The woman, a clerk typist, is released from the drudgery of her job when she meets a man distributing leaflets on a rainy day. The encounter starts to politicize her, and her life gains new meaning as she devotes herself to social causes. A lyrical mood is created with her recitation about rain on the soundtrack. RAIN is in super-8 and received an honorable mention at Los Angeles' Black Talkies on Parade festival in 1982.

Another aspect of many black people's shared experience is presented in Stormé Bright's videotape, THE SINGLE PARENT: IMAGES IN BLACK, a documentary in which black single parents discuss their feelings about raising children alone. They talk candidly in a group meeting and in individual interviews about problems they have had, as well as positive experiences. This 21-minute videotape is being used as a teaching aid in the California university system and circulates among women's groups and other interested people. Bright, who has an MFA from UCLA, is

currently working on two videotapes which will further explore group issues: SUPERSTITIONS IN A SUPERSTRUCTURE will examine professional athletes' superstitions and WHOSE CHILD? will discuss the strength of the extended family.

BLACK WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

Another theme that occurs frequently is the exploration of black women's experiences and identities. Books written by and about black women include Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla My Love*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Of the films already discussed, many incorporate the theme of women's experiences:

- * YOUR CHILDREN COME BACK TO YOU portrays two women of different generations who live without men and who try to provide what they each perceive as the best environment for a little girl.
- * A DIFFERENT IMAGE revolves around Alana's attempt to define herself as a strong, independent woman, although she must constantly fight sexist treatment and pressures to conform.
- * VARNETTE'S WORLD: A STUDY OF A YOUNG ARTIST documents the life of an independent black woman artist: her past struggle to achieve her goals, her current work with the community, and her personal fulfillment through art.
- * BEEN HERE BEFORE concerns the relations between black men and women in different cultures and times.
- * WATER RITUAL #1: AN URBAN RITE OF PURIFICATION depicts a woman's spiritual communion with her environment.
- * DIARY OF AN AFRICAN NUN concerns a black woman's doubts about a white God.
- * ONE is about black women lending support to one another over the ages.
- * AFRICAN WOMAN U.S.A. explores a woman's encounter with sexism, the bond between mother and daughter, friendship between women, and rape as seen through a woman's eyes.
- * MY CHILD, THEIR CHILD illustrates inequality to women under patriarchal customs and one woman's experience.
- * LITTLE ONES deals with a woman coming to terms with a stillbirth.
- * PAS SI BÔ shows the superficiality of women in travel advertisements and calls for black women to acknowledge their shared roots.
- * RAIN portrays a woman making changes in her life to find fulfillment.
- * THE SINGLE PARENT: IMAGES IN BLACK includes women who discuss raising children without men.

Three additional films that explore black women's experiences are SO YOU WANT TO BE AN ACTRESS, EVA'S MAN, and NAPPY-HEADED LADY. SO YOU WANT TO BE AN ACTRESS, by Ivy Sharpe, deals with the bias against black actors. It presents a fictional portrayal of a middle-aged black woman who, after having been a fairly successful stage actress in New York, moves to Los Angeles to act in films. While she dresses for the day she talks about the difficulty of being black in Hollywood where black actors have few parts. Juxtaposed against her monologue are still photos from Hollywood films showing white stars who set the standard for beauty, as well as black women playing servants and mammies. In a poignant moment, the woman combs her hair to look like Garbo's in an effort to conform to white standards. The woman reveals that her favorite role was Blanche DuBois in a black acting company's production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. She seems to slip in and out of playing Blanche, and it becomes apparent that, like Blanche, she has delusions about her life; rather than support herself as an actress, she has had to turn to prostitution to survive.

The film is in super-8, color, and 11 minutes long. Sharpe told me that her script is based partly on interviews with the actress who plays the woman in her film. A Hollywood actress herself, she talked to Sharpe about the treatment received by black actors over the decades. Sharpe organized and added fictional elements to the interview material, and then shot the film as if it were an interview taking place in the woman's apartment. The result is a blend of documentary and fiction with a feeling of spontaneity. According to Sharpe, her film is about all people who follow a dream, and more specifically, about assimilation. How do black women end up perceiving themselves after adopting white U.S. thought and trying to look like white movie stars?

EVA'S MAN, based on a novel by Gayle Jones, was made by Anita Addison. The film treats a black woman, Eva, who kills her lover. She refuses to speak to a white psychiatrist who questions her about her motives, so he leaves her with a tape recorder to confide in. In flashbacks, we see the abuse Eva suffered at the hands of a husband and two lovers.

Addison's film is in super-8, black and white, and 13 minutes long. Shifts in space and time give it a surreal quality that conveys Eva's state of mind. Music is also used effectively to evoke a range of feelings, from eerie to romantic to frenzied. Part of the music is original composed by Addison in collaboration with a musician; the rest is by Rhasaan Roland Kirk, Pharaoh Sanders, and Santana.

NAPPY-HEADED LADY, a work in progress by Melvonna Ballenger, will portray a young black woman growing up in the 1960s who rebels against her parents' desire to have her hair straightened, preferring an Afro hairstyle instead. The film will explore the effects of white standards of beauty on black women's self-concept. Documentary footage from the 1960s will connect the protagonist's struggle to the nationwide black movement. Shot in 16mm in black and white, the film

is planned to run about 30 minutes.

INFLUENTIAL BLACK PEOPLE

A final theme is that of famous or influential black people. Among black works of art that pay tribute to influential black people, there is Sofia Sanchez's poem entitled "a/coltrane/poem" in her collection, *We A BaddDDD People*, Aaron Douglas' painting, "Portrait of Dr. Mary McCleod Bethune," and the Kuumba Theatre Company of Chicago's production, *A Little Dreamer: The Life of Bessie Smith*, by Ed Shockley.

VARNETTE'S WORLD: A STUDY OF A YOUNG ARTIST, already discussed, pays homage to Varnette Honeywood for her talent and her contributions to L.A.'s black community. Carroll Blue, who made **VARNETTE'S WORLD**, has been working on a film about Roy de Carava, a still photographer whose photographs were included in Steichen's "Family of Man" exhibit and who was the first black photographer to be awarded a Guggenheim grant. Entitled **CONVERSATIONS WITH ROY DE CARAVA**, it was funded through WNET's television laboratory.

Barbara McCullough is working on a documentary about Horace Tapscott, a black jazz musician who chose to remain in Los Angeles after achieving national acclaim in order to use his musical talent to help the community he grew up in, McCullough's film is titled **HORACE TAPSCOTT, MUSICAL GRIOT**. The film will explore jazz in LA. from the mid-40s to the present as experienced by Tapscott.

Vicky Thomas is making a videotape about a black minister in Los Angeles to document the dedication and influence of ministers in the black community. She wants to explore the power of Los Angeles' ministers to work for change, as in their active protest against the L.A. police department's use of the choke hold.

For now, we must not wait for black women's films to obtain widespread distribution; their films are available for rent, prints can be bought, and new projects can be sponsored.

These alternatives to Hollywood avoid the avant-garde trap of appealing only to an elite audience; the films are both original and accessible. All of the filmmakers told me that they use forms and techniques that allow their films to be easily understood and enjoyed by working class audiences. The women are critical of filmic experimentation that results in obscurity. As one woman told me,

"I ask myself, will my grandmother or mother or sisters understand this and relate to it?"

The women feel free to use classical Hollywood narrative techniques as well as to experiment, as long as the films convey their intended ideas. Whether they choose to work within the narrative, documentary, or experimental modes, or any combination of these, they are committed to

communicating clearly.

FURTHER READINGS

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Alain Locke, Ed., *The Negro in Art* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1971).

Roger Whitlow, *Black American Literature* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1973).

RENTAL INFORMATION

- * Anita Addison, 544-G East Magnolia, Burbank, CA 91501
213/468-5914
- * Ruby Bell-Gam (Iyam), Theatre Arts Dept., UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90024
- * Stormé Bright, PD Box 1093, La Habra Heights, CA 90631
- * Karen Guyot, 2103 W. 109th, Los Angeles, CA 90047
- * Pamela Jones, 32081/2 Stocker, Los Angeles, CA 90008,
213/874-2200
- * Barbara McCullough, Po Box 35462, Los Angeles, CA
90035, 213/734-1373
- * Mildred Richard, 2 Breeze, #2, Venice, CA 90291,
213/399-6046
- * Vicky Thomas, 1021 Pointview, Los Angeles, CA 90035
- * Melvonna Ballenger, 31161/2 Stocker, #4, Los Angeles, CA
90008, 213/299-8955
- * Carroll Blue, 20491/2 South Holt, Los Angeles, CA 90034
- * Carmen Coustaut do Clemons, 1532 Swann, NW,
Washington, DC 20009
- * Ijeoma Iloputaife, Po Box 2584, Palos Verdes Peninsula,
CA 90274
- * Alile Larkin, Alile Productions, 1283 S. LaBrea, Box 192
Los Angeles, CA 90019, 213/939-8909
- * Anne S. Ngu, 3155 Sepulveda, #2, West Los Angeles, CA
90034
- * Ivy Sharpe, 4223 Garthwaite, Los Angeles, CA 90008

La Operación Forced sterilization

by Kimberly Safford

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"Over one-third of all Puerto Rican women of childbearing age have been sterilized. The procedure is so common that it is simply known as *La Operación*."

— sound track of *LA OPERACIÓN*

LA OPERACIÓN is in many ways a standard documentary film, complete with maps, graphs, and talking heads. But right away what sets this film apart from other documentaries are the scenes of the actual surgery. While these scenes are extremely graphic and many in the audience are too queasy to watch, they are not included simply for shock value. The repeated cutting open, snipping, and sewing-up of women's bodies sear all the other parts of the film into one's memory, especially the interviews with the women themselves. The surgery sequences also unite the experiences of these women from different class backgrounds. Ana María García, who was born in Cuba and has lived in Puerto Rico for many years, included the surgery scenes for two reasons.

While they are, in her words, "gory," these scenes prevent "sterilization" from degenerating into a concept or an intellectualization. Unlike other documentaries in which there is a strike or some other kind of "action," the filmmaker was concerned that sterilization could have become "just this idea that people discuss." It was important, she says, that the audience would be able to see what sterilization is in a concrete way and FEEL what it means at a gut level. In this sense, the surgery scenes have a big impact on Puerto Rican audiences. More importantly, many women and men in Puerto Rico today, even young, educated people, still believe that the tubes are tied and the operation is reversible. Ana María García says,

"I want everyone who sees the film to come out knowing that the tubes are CUT."

The interviews with the women are handled with great care and respect.

The filmmaker says,

"It was easy to find women who had been sterilized. It wasn't so easy to get them to talk about their experiences because it was often very painful for them. In many cases they would share personal experiences with me which they wouldn't want filmed."

At the same time, the film shows class differences among women. The programs aimed at bringing women into public birth control clinics target only the poor. One scene in *LA OPERACIÓN* follows a social worker from house to house, reminding women to visit the clinics. Teetering on high heels in the working-class front yards, she is shown as well meaning but patronizing, clearly out of place, intrusive.

As the filmmaker says, the film isn't just about sterilization. *LA OPERACIÓN* successfully shows sterilization as an integral part of U.S. policy in Puerto Rico, a futile attempt (along with emigration) to lower unemployment and decrease social tensions created by forced, rapid industrialization (Operation Bootstrap). However, as the film shows, all the problems attributed to "overpopulation" (unemployment, inadequate housing, poor nutrition, sub-standard healthcare and education) have never gone away. One mayor, in an interview in the film, proudly explains how nearly every woman in his town was sterilized. Gesturing to a group of men sitting idly, he explains,

"They are resting, while the women are working at the factory over there (for lower wages than men)."

Ana María García points out that, to Puerto Ricans, this mayor is a pathetic character. It was his party (in power from 1952 to 1968) which helped create and carry out Operation Bootstrap and the sterilization program. He embodies the idea of that kind of development for Puerto Rico, and it's obvious to most people on the Island that those programs have failed.

Screenings of the film have generated intense discussion, ranging from personal experiences to the political situation in Puerto Rico. *LA OPERACIÓN* is a good model for documentaries because it makes connections between government policies and personal lives, treating sterilization as a product of colonization. In Puerto Rico, the filmmaker says, the film hits very close to home:

"All the women interviewed could be you, your mother, your wife, your sister, your daughter, and your friend. One way or another this issue touches everyone's life."

(Go to [interview with director, Ana María García](#))

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Interview with *La Operación's* Ana María García

"Not many options for contraception"

by Iraida López

translated by Kimberly Safford

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This interview is translated from the *Boletín del Circulo de Cultura Cubana*, GPO Box 2174, NY, NY, 10016.

López: Why did you make your first film about the sterilization of Puerto Rican women?

García: One reason for my taking up the theme of sterilization had a lot to do with the eruption of this issue between 1974 and 1976, both in Puerto Rico and in the United States. It was a time when sterilization was a very hot topic, and I always wanted to make my first film about Puerto Rico. I also chose sterilization because it deals with life, with reproduction, with children — all very important issues in peoples lives, that touch me deeply.

In 1974, Puerto Rican politicians of every stripe spoke before the United Nations to present the case of genocide on the island. At that time, more than one-third (35%) of all Puerto Rican women had been sterilized. By 1981 it was 39%. These rates were actually developed on paper in 1968, but it wasn't until 6 years later that they were fully realized. In 1974, the Puerto Rican Health Department created an auxiliary section of Family Planning headed by Antonio Silva. Silva's department was to direct an extremely aggressive program of population control. Its explicit aim was to lower the birth rate, unlike other family planning programs which were designed to contribute to mothers' health.

In this program, sterilization played a particularly intense role. All the goals were superceded. The original goal of the program was 5,000 sterilizations per year (this was confirmed by Silva in a New York Times interview). In fact, over 1,000 women were sterilized each month in public hospitals alone. The same "service" was also offered in private facilities and was covered by medical insurance. Pro-independence

leaders and the Catholic Church began to sound the alarm. Cardinal Augusto Martínez wrote editorials in several newspapers, pointing the finger at Silva. The then opposition party also opposed sterilization — ironically today it's operating the same program, although not on such a massive scale.

The film really isn't just about sterilization, although that is its focus. Its wider context is the colonization of Puerto Rico and the politics of population control. Sterilization and emigration were the results of a political and economic situation forced on Puerto Rico by the United States.

López: When did the sterilization program actually begin?

García: In 1937 a law was approved permitting sterilization for health and economic reasons. This law was primarily aimed at low-income women. Certain laws already existed allowing the dissemination of birth control information. But before these laws went into effect, there was a great public controversy which began around 1920 about what was called "Neo-Malthusianism" in Puerto Rico. The idea was laid out that the island was "over-populated" and this "over-population" had to be controlled. When Operation Bootstrap began, Puerto Rico suffered a rapid transformation of its economy. Unemployment skyrocketed and an outlet was needed for the burgeoning workforce. To achieve this, sterilization was consciously developed as a long-term solution (by lowering the birth rate) and emigration was encouraged as a short-term solution.

López: As you demonstrate in the film, many women who were sterilized were poorly informed about the consequences of the operation. But there are others who consciously chose sterilization as a contraceptive measure. How do you interpret this?

García: These women were responding to a series of conditions in their personal lives, as well as to the situation in Puerto Rico. The radical transformation of the island's economy was done in a very short period of time. This disrupted people's lives. At the same time, sterilization was legal and accessible. You could find it around the corner, sold as commonly and cheaply as fresh bread. This pushed women towards certain choices. Also, there weren't many other contraceptive options. The best-known contraceptives were the diaphragm and spermicides, which often aren't used very effectively and aren't very attractive to many Hispanic women. I can only speculate that sterilization gave some women the opportunity to take control of their lives under circumstances in which — because of their condition as women in a colonized situation — control of their lives was in someone else's hands.

López: As for the structure of the film — the montage you create combining four own filmed sequences and fragments from archival footage is reminiscent of certain documentaries by Santiago Alvarez. How have you been influenced by Cuban cinema?

García: I have always admired the work of Santiago Alvarez and I think I have seen almost all of his films, as well as many other Cuban documentaries. As a matter of fact, when I began work on LA OPERACIÓN, one of the things I did (as a self-teaching method) to learn how to make documentaries was to screen all the Cuban films at Unifilm. I analyzed the thematic structure, the camera and editing techniques, the sound track, and I learned a lot that way.

There is a quality of Cuban film which I feel I haven't been able to develop yet. For example, in the documentary POR PRIMERA VEZ by Octavio Cortazar, the filmmaker extracts a poetic quality from the situation. I don't think I have achieved this in LA OPERACIÓN, whose character is more journalistic. But that is one of the aspects of Cuban film I most admire. I have discussed this with the Cuban filmmaker Jesús Díaz. He calls that poetic quality "take one"-capturing a situation by intuition. You don't know beforehand what you'll find, it's not a preconceived situation, but something you must shoot at that moment or lose forever.

López: Don't you think that the opening sequence of LA OPERACIÓN, the moment of giving birth, is a "take one"?

García: It could be, although the birth scene was already "programmed" into the film. What you see in 55 HERMANOS and EN TIERRA DE SANDINO are unforeseen situations, and I hope to film in that way in the future.

López: Tell us about the public response in the places where the film has been shown.

García: The first place where the final version of LA OPERACIÓN was shown was the festival in Valladolid, Spain, in 1982. It was part of a program of 35 independent North American films. After the screening, there was a talk between the audience (and it was a rather large one) and myself. It became pretty heated, because the discussion turned towards the colonization of Puerto Rico and the audience was divided on this issue. One of the intentions of the film is to do just that — to go beyond the issue of sterilization. After that, the film was shown at the Spanish Cinemateca in Madrid, at the film festival in Mérida, Venezuela, and at the 4th Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana where it won the 3rd prize in the documentary category.

In Puerto Rico, the opening of LA OPERACIÓN was sponsored by a group of ten unions, including the National Association of Public Employees which represents healthcare workers and the Working Women's Organization. The fact that all these groups sponsored the screening shows that they consider the film important. The film has been shown in various universities, in squatters' barrios such as Villa Sin Miedo and Juan Matos en Cataño, at the Lawyers' College, and in a commercial theater where it opened a weeklong program of Puerto Rican film. Certain scenes were also shown on a popular television program. I heard it had a big impact on TV and that many people called

in asking to see the entire film.

López: Films like LA OPERACIÓN and the soon-to-be-released OPERACIÓN MANOS A LA OBRA (OPERATION BOOTSTRAP) examine important social and historic events in Puerto Rico with a critical consciousness. Are these films part of a continuous tradition in Puerto Rican cinema, or are they a new trend?

García: LA OPERACIÓN and OPERACIÓN MANOS Á LA OBRA don't break any new ground. Puerto Rican cinema of social content has roots in several different bases. Some documentaries have been produced by the Community Education Division, and while they aren't openly political and don't challenge the established order, they do reflect certain realities of Puerto Rican life. One can point to the work of José García, who has made documentaries about the Nationalists, Julia de Burgos, and Manifest Destiny; the films of Diego de la Tejera about Culebra and his better-known EL SALVADOR, EL PUEBLO VENCERÁ; EL ARRESTO by Luis Rosario Quiles, about the repression of the Nationalists in Puerto Rico, especially Pedro Albizu Campos during the 1950's; DIOS LOS CRIA by Jacobo Morales, one of the first fiction films about certain lifestyles in Puerto Rico today; and PUERTO RICO, PARADISE INVADED by a Brazilian with the help of José García. As you can see, there are varied precedents within this current tendency of Puerto Rican filmmaking.

DISTRIBUTION OF FILMS

- EL ARRESTO (THE ARREST). Dir. Antonio Rosario, 1982. 30 min., 16mm, Spanish with English subtitles. Bondo, Inc., Po Box 40030, San Juan, PR 00940. (809) 724-5184.
- OPERACIÓN MANOS Á LA OBRA (OPERATION BOOTSTRAP). Dir. Pedro Rivera, 1982. 60 min., 16mm, Spanish with English subtitles and English narration. Pedro Rivera, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, 695 Park Ave., NY, NY 10021. (212) 772-5689.
- PUERTO RICO: PARADISE INVADED. Alfonso Beato, Dir., 1977. 30 min., 16mm, Spanish with English subtitles. The Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, NY, NY 10019. (212) 246-5522.
- EL SALVADOR: EL PEUBLO VENCERÁ (EL SALVADOR: THE PEOPLE WILL WIN). Dir. Diego de la Texera and the Film Institute of Revolutionary El Salvador, 1980. 80 min., 16mm, Spanish dialogue with English subtitles and English narration. The Cinema Guild.
- LA OPERACIÓN. Dir. Ana María García, 1982. 40 min., 16mm, Spanish or English versions. Ana María García, Po Box 735, Old Chelsea Station, NY, NY 10011. (212) 246-3354.
- EN TIERRA DE SANDINO (IN THE LAND OF SANDINO). Dir. Jesus Dfaz, Cuba, 1980. 71 mm, 35 mm prints only (blown up from 16mm), Spanish with English subtitles. Young Filmmakers Foundation, 4 Rivington Street, NY, NY, 10002. (212) 673-9361.
- 55 HERMANOS (55 BROTHERS AND SISTERS). Dir. Jesús Díaz,

- Cuba, 1978. 77 min., 35 mm prints only (blown up from 16 mm), Spanish with English subtitles. Young Filmmakers Foundation.
- POR PRIMERA VEZ (FOR THE FIRST TIME). Dir. Octavio Cortazar, Cuba, 1966. 10 min., 16mm, Spanish with English subtitles. California Newsreel, 630 Natoma, San Francisco, CA 94103. (415) 621-196. Third World Newsreel, 39 160 Fifth Ave., Room 911, NY, NY 10010. (212) 243-2310.
 - CULEBRA: THE BEGINNING. Dir. Diego de la Texera, 1971. 20 min., 16mm. Diego de la Texera, Buzon 815-F Carr, 186 Km 10, Cubuy, Canovanas, PR 00629.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Diva

High tech sexual politics

by Ernece B. Kelly

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DIVA, now reeling into its second year in New York City, its third year in Paris, is quite a special film. It's not only a well-crafted thriller. It also has wondrous music, tableaux-like scenes of stunning beauty, and a cast of bizarre characters.

The casting is worth noting. Not only does an Asian play the surprising role of the streetwise nymph with a heart of gold, but a Black actress plays a central and non-racial role. I mean two things by the term 'non-racial.' First, opera singer, Wilhelmenia Wiggins Fernandez, playing the part of the diva, is certainly not stereotyped. The diva is scripted with enviable qualities: personal courage, self-assurance, a sense of humor, and handsome beauty. And, except for one brief scene in which a Black man compliments her by calling her "Queen of Africa," the film makes no special point of her race.

While some cultural nationalists might argue that such treatment of Blacks diminishes a people's rich history and culture by pretending as if they were no different from whites, my guess is that Blacks and some whites are hungry for these kinds of more complex and unexpected roles for people of color. A diet of thin, old stereotypes fails to nourish us as viewers.

DIVA's popularity is explained not only by these qualities, however, but also by its comforting romantic images of social relations. Because it shows women in highly differentiated roles, the film seems to put them on a par with men. But they're not. The female characters are decidedly weaker in terms of their ability to initiate action, specifically the acts of taking and giving. Nadia, the primary exception, is murdered in the film's opening sequences.

And, although we see a variety of women here, we see practically no female solidarity. So while individual women characters may seem exceptionally strong, without a community their strength is presented as

a dead end. In other words, their visible potential for affecting change is frozen in just that stage, potential. The one exception the film shows to this general condition is unflattering — solidarity exists solely among prostitutes.

DIVA leaves its women to have relations only with men, and then only half-realized relations. It's as if some capacity for shared intimacy is missing, resulting in the characters' being *in association* rather than together. Even the characters' conspicuous eccentricities fail to explain the emotional and psychological gulfs between them. In fact, glaring racial and age differences are strangely ignored by the storyline that are so distracting in our age and race-conscious society, that these differences may well provide sufficient explanation. The two principal male characters are white; the women they relate to are the diva who is Black and Alba who is Vietnamese. And one man, Gorodish, looks old enough to be Alba's father, while Jules is eighteen and his flame, the diva, probably around 35. In this respect, the film is old and conservative wine carefully poured into a shiny bottle with New Wave labels.

The diva and Alba, the principal women characters, are consistently shown as social isolates. Plotlines develop so that they never meet. The film's events keep them isolated from most kinds of social contacts. Neither is shown with friends, acquaintances, or relatives. Neither woman of color shows a connection with her cultural group or betrays a longing for any. Both have an ongoing relationship — such as it is — with only one man, a white man.

The film makes the viewer experience and understand the women characters only through men. This is a theme hinted at in one of the film's earliest shots. In the opening scene, we first glimpse the diva filmed directly. Then we watch her reflected in sunglasses worn by a man in the audience. The shot provides a visual metaphor for the narrative and social importance of men and relative unimportance of women. Men are active; they use their eyes for seeing. Women, on the other hand, are to be seen, and they are seen well when reflected through men. The film consistently depicts its principal female character either isolated or in the company of men.

The diva, for example, is shown as having an important and long-standing relationship with her manager, also a white male. She needs him but not so much that she'll maintain a relation with him at all costs. Specifically, she's unwilling to compromise her principles — she does not wish to make recordings. When her stance forces him to choose between changing his mind or leaving her, he leaves. Similarly, Alba has a live-in relationship with Gorodish, to whom she refers as "The Lone Ranger," implying that they don't ride together. And even Paula, a minor character, is consistently shown either alone or in the company of men. The prostitutes provide an exception to the pattern. One who first services, then befriends, and then betrays Jules is in touch with other women. She walks the streets and shares cigarettes with other

prostitutes. And finally she chooses to protect not only herself but her community, this group of women, by informing on Jules.

In a scene shot in medium and close shots, we learn that this compassion and solidarity is mutual. The prostitute, who has just befriended Jules by lending him her apartment as temporary sanctuary from the crook's henchmen, hesitates to make her phone call to the "Chief." Her friend, as if to lend her the strength to make it, reminds her of what happened to Nadia. The prostitute makes the call, and the two henchmen come to her place to get Jules. While the way in which the scene is shot tends to draw us into the women's company, few viewers would identify with them as readily as with some other female characters. The result structures ambiguity in our potential response to these female characters.

Yet, while the film may be criticized for its failure to show female solidarity, it also does not show women's full and gratifying relations with men. In fact, the women characters experience only superficial and imperfectly realized romantic relationships. Indeed, men and women care about one another, but their feelings don't lead anywhere.

For example, in one of their most sexually suggestive sequences, Jules ends up treating the diva with more respect than love, more awe than affection. They're walking. It's an overcast day with intermittent rain. Jules holds the umbrella for both of them, but he doesn't hold it as he might, low enough to create a tiny haven of privacy and closeness. Instead he holds it high, several feet above their heads. It becomes a symbol of reverence. It's the kind of gesture one looks for in the entourage of a queen, one who earlier had been called "Queen of Africa."

When Jules and the diva pause at some abandoned outdoor tables, they sit with bodies turned away from each other. Neither talks. Finally, Jules gets up, goes over to her, and puts his hand on her shoulder. She looks at him. Is she grateful for his tenderness? Moved by his attentions? Enamored? Infatuated? In love? It's impossible to tell.

The same kind of ambiguity colors the closing sequences of the movie. Here, Jules and the diva are standing very close on the operahouse stage. Their arms are touching each other's bodies, but curiously they're standing at a 45-degree angle to one another. Jules eventually rests his head on her shoulder. The camera, which had never come in for a close shot, begins to pull back so that the scene ends in a very distant perspective. What had begun as a scene with romantic potential rather quickly becomes something else through a combination of stage direction and camerawork. The intimacy we might have felt with this pair is denied us. Hence, the scene and the film end by insisting that only ambiguous relationships can exist between men and women in cross-age and cross-race settings.

Audience expectations are similarly manipulated in a scene with Gorodish and Alba, his friend. Their relationship all along has seemed more friendly than loving, more sensuous than sensual, but in one

particular sequence, we're led to believe that they're going to bed. They've just succeeded in whisking Jules away from the clutches of the Chief's henchmen, and have carried him to safety, to what Alba calls the "magic castle." As they rest after their harrowing rescue, we see them in medium shot, Gorodish is chain smoking, apparently planning how to outsmart the Chief. Alba is perched suggestively on the arm of his chair, dressed in a seductively cut dress. They seem on the edge of doing something sexual. But then Gorodish abruptly leaves, and Alba is left to nurse Jules back to health.

In keeping with this, pattern of thwarting viewers' expectations of male-female relationships is the film's treatment of the principal male characters. Again, expectations are disappointed. Both men are "feminized" in that they have skills, avocations, and attributes traditionally associated with women. Both Gorodish and Jules seem comfortable with their "feminine" styles, encouraging audiences to accept them finally without censure or question. Yet, when women characters in fictional films assume traditionally male attributes, such as assuming initiative or showing personal courage, they are at best shown as abandoned, at worst as murdered.

In the film, Gorodish is a homemaker. We never see him working outside his place. He takes obvious delight in cooking in his kitchen. In one humorous scene he elaborately demonstrates the Zen of buttering bread. And he enjoys sensuous pleasures of bathing while listening to music. In the narrative action, Gorodish confronts the murderous villains twice, and both times his style is "feminine". He overcomes one killer by squirting a chemical in the thug's face. And he tricks another murderer into stepping into an open elevator shaft. Gorodish's methods are quiet and stealthy and involve neither physical conflict nor contact. They are tactics conventionally associated with a woman's defenses, not a man's offensive.

Jules, the other principal male character, departs from masculine standards in literally more physical ways. He's puny. His too-big cap and oversized parka and overwhelming motorcycle helmet underscore his scrawniness (The *New Yorker's* film reviewer aptly dubbed him "birdlike".) Jules delivers mail on a moped, a decidedly less masculine symbol than, say, a motorcycle. He's a devotee of opera — not a traditionally male, working class, musical favorite.

But the array of women is quite a different story. Nadia, for example, has taken the initiative. She has made the tape intended to destroy the Chief of Homicide. She has also taken what she must know is a fatal step by telling the police of the tapes' existence. So, both these steps are brave and the type usually reserved for male heroes. (The camera follows Nadia's feet as she literally takes steps carrying her to her rendezvous with the police.)

Her act of giving the tape — all giving, in fact — presumes not only possession but also privilege. And because she presumes possession and that privilege of selecting who to give her possession to, she is punished.

In a sense, she is destroyed for acting more like a man than a woman. In this way, she is strikingly different from other women in the film. The others give insignificant things, and those things which they take are also insignificant in comparison to the sometimes precious things which men take from women.

Beginning with the opening scene of the movie, Jules is not only listening to the diva, he is recording her voice, stealing it, as it were. Two serious consequences spin off of that theft. The diva seems robbed of some measure of professional stability, for her manager leaves her. And, second, she seems to be robbed of her certitude around the question of whether or not her voice should be recorded.

Moreover, after the concert, Jules comes to her dressing room with others from the audience to congratulate her. As he's leaving, he steals her gown. Whereas he came to the theatre with a sophisticated recorder and his mailbag to conceal it in, his theft of the gown appears spontaneous. But it's by no means trivial. For newspaper headlines the next day carry news of the theft. The movie audiences laughed when those headlines were flashed, suggesting surprise that the theft warranted this kind of front page treatment.

A woman's voice is also stolen by the two Taiwanese businessmen, whom we first see at the concert which opens the movie. Anxious to make a private record from Jules' taped recording, they steal a tape at gunpoint. They're murdered before realizing that they've stolen Nadia's tape, not the diva's voice.

But clothing and women's voices are not the only things taken by men. Nadia, the prostitute-turned-informer, has her life taken from her — by a man!

Consequently, there is simply no comparison between these significant kinds of thefts and the kinds of things taken by women. The one women we observe stealing is Alba. She takes watches and phonograph records. But, unlike the male thieves, she doesn't steal for herself. She gives these things to men: inexplicably to Jules whom she's just met and to Gorodish. In other words, she's merely an intermediary for things: they don't come to rest with her or to ultimately belong to her. So, although the *act* of theft is similar, the quality of a woman's thieving is altogether different from that of the men.

Lastly, the homage DIVA pays to modern technology is so great that cars, recording devices, even telephones are pivotal. And with their primacy, certain questions arise: Can we use technology without being seduced into the belief that it's omnipotent? Can we use technology and not like it? Can technology's seemingly limitlessness, blind us to our own superiority?

Its primacy is obvious. Both main and subplot revolve around an audiotape. And tape recorders are practically ubiquitous. They appear and reappear throughout the film. Jules, a prostitute, Gorodish, the

splendid antique car belonging to Gorodish, the projection room in the opera house — all these people and places have them.

And automobiles are similarly omnipresent. They're also used for an extraordinary variety of things. They're deathtraps, meeting places, a trysting place. They're subjects of stories and of symbolism, a means of destruction, ambulances, a place of torture, things of striking beauty, visual gags, and, of course, means of transportation.

Cars are loved and hated here. The two poles express the film's ambivalence toward technology. Jules, the innocent, loves cars and has filled his apartment with parts of them. Twisted wrecks of expensive models (a Rolls Royce, for one) litter his anteroom. His sofa was once a car seat. And a surreal mural of a car careening toward (or is it away from?) a small child dominates one wall. On the other hand, Cure, one of the henchmen of the Chief, is outspoken in his scorn of cars. "I don't like cars," he says, watching one being demolished in a wrecking yard. The visual image strengthens the power of his sentiment.

With cars figuring so importantly here, viewers half-expect the obligatory car chase. We're not disappointed, but there's a refreshing and telling twist: it's car vs. moped, and the car loses. This loss is an early harbinger of one of the film's themes: the individual's ultimate superiority to technology.

Mirroring this notion is the outcome of each of the tapes. Jules' is eventually given to the diva; in her possession we can assume no one else will ever hear it. And Nadia's tape is destroyed by a car bomb. So, despite the capacity of tapes to generate a great deal of activity of both a physical and psychological kind, they ultimately "die."

In contrast, something that doesn't die is the diva's attitude opposed to technology. Refusing to record, she insists on that special moment between the artist and audience which occurs only during a live performance. "Business should adapt to art, not the other way around," she maintains. (Any suggestion of elitism is offset by her association with Jules, who is solidly working class.)

Even the death of the Chief of Homicide is directly traceable to a shortcoming of technology, or, one might argue, the Chief's misguided optimism. The closing sequences take place in Jules' apartment. The Chief's henchmen have carried Jules there. They torture him, forcing him to implicate himself in the contents of yet a third tape. This one has falsified information about the origins of the Chief's international vice ring.

Earlier, the police officer assigned to stake out the apartment was called back to the office by the Chief, who alleged that there was paper work to do. Complaining, the subordinate leaves. But he leaves behind his policewoman friend, Paula. Of course, the Chief has no way of knowing this and no reason to think there's more than one officer there. He has recklessly relied on a telephone to provide information which lies

outside its capacity. It cannot show or otherwise indicate unasked for information. Paula is instrumental in his death.

DIVA's idealistic tribute to individual supremacy over high-tech is, however, seriously compromised by its visions of women and of their collective potential for change. And given the film's dismal vision of interracial and cross-age relationships, who, are we to conclude, are those individuals who have primacy? It seems they are white males who are either unattached or aligned with white females. So, even with its daring casting, even with its New Wave sound and look, video machines, and high technology, at its heart, DIVA betrays an old-fashioned rightwing bias.

Notes

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Personal Best Lesbian/feminist audience

by Chris Straayer

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copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1984, 2005

In JUMP CUT, No. 27, Linda Williams provides an excellent feminist critique of PERSONAL BEST, focusing on its female iconography and then on its depiction of a lesbian relationship. However she does not investigate the question of female viewer response. Both depiction and audience reception are essential to feminist film theory. The first can demonstrate sexism in a particular film. The second explores how women audiences can enjoy such a film.

That the content of Hollywood movies is overwhelmingly sexist formed the first major argument of feminist film theory. Three books of the early 70s, Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus* and Joan Mellen's *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film*, utilized historical and sociological approaches to demonstrate mainstream film's misrepresentation of women to reinforce patriarchal ideology. The multitude of feminist film critiques, which followed these books, aimed at exposing this ideology at work, making explicit the often-implicit sexism. Feminist film theorists were especially well armed for this task because ideology operates by presenting itself as "natural." And a basic tenet of early feminist consciousness raising was to question all taken-for-granted assumptions.

In a 1975 article in *Screen*, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey expanded feminist criticism against film content to include the narrative form and the cinematic apparatus itself. Adopting a Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytical approach, she maintained that classical narrative cinema is constructed specifically for the male viewer's erotic look. Woman serves as image, object of this look, both within the narrative's development and as spectacle apart from the narration. Woman's lack of a penis, however, provokes castration fears in the male viewer, who then seeks either to disavow castration through fetishism or to replay the original trauma with woman in the guilty role through voyeurism. Classical narrative cinema produces both

alternatives as visual pleasures. Through close ups, shallow depth of field, costuming, etc., woman's image is made fetish for the male spectators scopophilic gaze. Within the narrative, the guilty woman's character is punished or forgiven.

Reactions to Mulvey's article varied. Some feminist filmmakers and critics rejected narrative film style for avant-garde forms, which could disrupt male viewing pleasure. Feminist film theory modeled on Lacanian psychoanalysis began to spread. However, other feminist film theorists objected to the uncritical use of psychoanalysis as a model due to its sexist premises. While discussing some questions, Mulvey's position avoided others. If classical narrative cinema is constructed for male viewing pleasure, how is woman's viewing pleasure explained? Mulvey's approach left little room for female viewing pleasure other than via identification with the male viewer or regression to her own earlier phallic stage. Many feminists resented the implications. Some found an alternative to the Lacanian approach by expanding on a well-known 1970 *Cahiers du Cinéma* article, "John Ford's YOUNG MR. LINCOLN," which argued for "subversive" reading. Such an act constructs multiple meanings by reading against the grain or locating gaps within the "preferred" reading. This implies an intellectually active viewer.

A good example of this approach is a 1981 article in *Film Reader*, No. 5, "PreText and Text in GENTLEMAN PREFER BLONDES," where Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca provide a feminist reading of GENTLEMAN PREFER BLONDES in order to "recoup from male culture some of the pleasure which it has always denied us." Rather than analyzing male voyeuristic pleasure in this film, as Maureen Turim did in her negative assessment of Hawks' film in *Wide Angle*, No. 1, they explore their own pleasure. This pleasure depends on the film's "positive identification for the female viewer" which is enhanced by the resistance to male objectification by its women characters and its focus on women's connection to each other. Arbuthnot and Seneca state,

"Positive identification with other women is precious both because it is crucial to our own positive self-image as women, and because it is suppressed both in life and art."

They maintain that the fictional narrative form holds pleasure for women as well as men. Independent feminist films that disrupt narrative to destroy male pleasure only succeed in destroying the pleasure of identification for both sexes. In other words, identification is not in itself a male operation.

Arbuthnot and Seneca's article posits a female viewer quite opposite to any allowed by a psychoanalytic approach. Their viewing actively seeks pleasure, yet this pleasure is decidedly not in the film's sexism. The weakness of their approach, however, is that it disengages entirely from any critical opposition to that sexism. It constructs woman-identified meaning without interrogating patriarchal ideology.

It is at this point in an ongoing dialogue among feminist film theorists that my study of PERSONAL BEST and its lesbian/feminist audience enters. I suggest a more sociological approach. Observing considerable debate in the lesbian/ feminist community and press regarding PERSONAL BEST, I decided to question viewers themselves about their reactions to the film. Though my questionnaire lacked proper design for strict statistical analysis, it did lead to some interesting observations. The unique sample chosen for questioning, i.e., lesbian/feminists, brought to light certain new considerations regarding the female viewing experience. For example, consideration of the woman viewer as lesbian accentuates certain pitfalls in the use of a psychoanalytic model.

William's review of PERSONAL BEST does recognize the question of the female viewer, whose autonomy within an entertainment industry controlled by and serving males is questioned. Though herself critical of the film's "ass, crotch and muscle fetishes of the eighties," Williams states,

"I strongly suspect that such images invite women to consume them from a temporarily assumed male point of view. If women could not learn to at least partially assume the male viewpoint in consuming such images, they would experience constant visual displeasure in the bombardment of female body parts provided by the media."

If applied specifically to PERSONAL BEST's lesbian/feminist audience, this suggestion could perpetuate homophobic myths. Lesbians have persistently been misassigned a male point of view by straight society. Sexual preference is confused with gender identity. Freudian and Lacanian psychology fosters this misconception by its denial of active female sexuality. Lesbians are a vulnerable target for any theory that terms activity as "phallic." One conclusion apparent from my survey of lesbian/feminist viewers is that they are not consuming sexist imagery from a male point of view. Their enjoyment of PERSONAL BEST is similar to that described by Arbuthnot and Seneca with one important corollary.

Certainly PERSONAL BEST provides for a feminist reading without requiring subversion. The Donnelly and Hemingway characters defend each other against a manipulative heterosexist coach and at the end support each other despite Hemingway's move into heterosexuality. The film's depiction of vigorous sports activity challenges sexist stereotypes of feminine passivity. And its presentation of lesbianism without obligatory explanation or maximum punishment is a rarity. Any feminist pleasure in PERSONAL BEST, however, is bittersweet and coexists with a conscious discomfort with equally obvious sexism and heterosexism in the film's images and narrative. The lesbian/feminists whom I surveyed demonstrated a viewing experience which contains simultaneously both a feminist reading and a feminist critique.

SURVEY ON LESBIAN/FEMINIST VIEWERS'
RESPONSES TO *PERSONAL BEST*

In May 1982, 44 women filled out questionnaires about their reactions to PERSONAL BEST, which were distributed in Chicago by a few lesbian/ feminist friends, two feminist bookstores, and myself. This is what sociologists term a "snowball" sample. Rather than obtaining a diverse sample, the intent was to survey a relatively homogenous and specific population: lesbians and feminists who operate within a lesbian/feminist culture.

Of the 44 responders, 32 identified themselves as lesbian, 6 as bisexual, 5 as straight, and 1 unsure of her present sexual identity. 43 of the sample identified themselves as feminist. Ages ranged from 21-47 years and were comparably dispersed among the above subgroups. The majority of women described themselves as white; four said they were Mexican, American Indian, or Black. Four others identified themselves as Jewish (some of the "white" category were also probably Jewish — my questionnaire was not perfect).

The means I chose for distribution directed questionnaires to lesbians who experience feminism in their public (bookstore) or private (friends) spheres and straight or bisexual feminists who have close contact with lesbian friends and co-workers. Considering this shared position in a specific political subculture, it is not surprising that no significant differences were found among lesbian and non-lesbian subgroups. Each subgroup exhibited a parallel range of responses. Therefore the group is considered as a whole here and referred to as lesbian/feminists. In no way does this sample pretend to represent women in general or, in fact, the entire diversity of lesbians and feminists.

Responders were asked to gauge their responses to PERSONAL BEST using the following categories: loved it; liked it very much; liked it some; disliked it; hated it. Approximately 70% of the sample responded favorably (loved it, liked it very much, liked it some) and 30% unfavorably (didn't like it, hated it). Twenty per cent indicated that they had liked the film more at the time of viewing (average one and a half months before) than they did now. However an inspection of reactions to more specific parts of PERSONAL BEST reveals these basic statistics to be an oversimplification. Indeed, 91% of the sample indicated that they were split in their reactions.

Detailed answers blurred any clear boundary between favorable and unfavorable response groups. As might be expected, lesbian/feminists originally in the favorable response group were more likely to be glad that the movie was made and feel that it was progressive for a Hollywood product. A few unfavorable responders, however, also felt this way. When asked if they liked the film's ending, if the film portrayed lesbianism as positive and if its lesbian relationship was an accurate representation according to their own experience, lesbian/feminists originally in the unfavorable response group gave predominately negative answers again. However, a majority of the favorable responders also answered these questions negatively. For example, one lesbian/feminist liked the film but thought it didn't present lesbianism

accurately because,

"I saw no evidence of love between the two women. I was especially shocked during the car fight when Torrie said they fucked each other. I've never heard a lesbian use that word to describe her lovemaking."

Sixty-four per cent of the lesbian/feminists surveyed indicated that they went to see PERSONAL BEST because they had heard that it was about lesbians. After viewing, only 10% felt that the film was indeed about lesbians. 42% felt the film to be about sports. 3% thought the subject to be a mixture of sports and lesbianism. Other responders provided answers consisting of "male perspective of lesbians or women athletes," "male voyeurism," "male fantasies," and "male pornography." Interestingly, those women who expected PERSONAL BEST to be about lesbians are found in higher percentages among the liked some, disliked and hated categories, possibly suggesting that their dislike of the film relates to disappointed expectations.

An overwhelming majority (93%) of this sample said that they like the image of women athletes. Responses frequently referred to the athletes' strength, beauty, naturalness and internal determination. Less typical responses were:

"Muscularity and physical fitness seem to now be another demand on women's bodies," and

"This image is too boy-like. It rejects more full, womanly figures."

In contrast to the sample's predominately positive reaction to the image of female athletes was a strong negative reaction (87%) to the use of that image by *Playboy* magazine. The April issue of *Playboy* did an interview with Robert Towne, the director of PERSONAL BEST, and reproduced several PERSONAL BEST stills including one from the steam bath scene. Also several poses of Mariel Hemingway, which were not from PERSONAL BEST, were printed. Of the 33 negative comments about this *Playboy* coverage, the most commonly used words were "anger" and "disgust." Responses also included such reactions as "not surprised," "pornography" and "usual exploitation by males." Of the remaining responders, 4 indicated that they didn't care and 1 indicated that she would buy the issue.

The sharp contrast between the results of these two questions testifies that similar images can be used for grossly different purposes both by the image-makers and the viewers. Several comments occurred on questionnaires indicating that, while those viewers were enjoying PERSONAL BEST, they were also aware of and made uneasy by the knowledge that straight males in the audience might be enjoying this same film in a more sexist way. One responder related her ability to experience the film psychologically disengaged from male audience presence. From this rare perspective of woman space and sensibility, it

was possible to appreciate the muscular achievement in the crotch shots without the images' usual pornographic connotation. Interesting in relation to Laura Mulvey's article, another responder conjectured that men's liking of PERSONAL BEST was tantamount to their watching of sexy women in *Playboy* while simultaneously stating,

"I was seduced by Torrie and Chris. I liked the way the characters watched each other."

Yet obviously she felt her reactions differed from men's.

The questionnaires used for this survey allowed for better qualitative assessment than quantitative. Responders were encouraged to write comments as well as pick among given choices. Three questions of particular interest simply asked responders what parts of the film they liked, disliked or would change. Their answers provide evidence against any notion that they viewed PERSONAL BEST from a male point of view. Regardless of overall favorable or unfavorable ratings, a feminist viewpoint is active throughout the sample. Not one questionnaire submitted was without some acknowledgement of sexism or heterosexism in the film. Viewing pleasure co-existed with displeasure.

Both those responders who liked the film and those who disliked it listed many of the same complaints and praises regarding PERSONAL BEST. When divided into the following four groups, these comments demonstrate both a lesbian/feminist reading and a lesbian/feminist critique.

Pro-Lesbian parts which were liked: Lesbians are shown (on film and, at times, openly in relation to other characters) displaying affection/caring for each other (hugging, kissing, making love, tickling, finger pulling. Torrie cares for Chris in shower; Torrie calls Chris her "side kick"; Chris helps Torrie in final race, etc.). Torrie is coded as lesbian and projects lesbian energy attractively and realistically.

Pro-Woman parts which were liked: Women perform athletic feats (arm wrestle, run up hill and on beach, outrun male runner during practice, lift heavy weights). Women rebel against domineering coach (Chris talks to Torrie in lunchroom).

Anti-Lesbian parts which were disliked: Coach is sexually aggressive towards Chris in his apartment. Coach insults lesbian relationship and lovemaking. Torrie is depicted as stereotypical jealous lover spying on Chris in restaurant. Torrie and Chris never talk about their relationship and use word "fucking" to name their lovemaking. Torrie talks about old boyfriend. Chris kisses guy at party as if heterosexuality were more valid than lesbianism even while in a lesbian relationship.

Anti-Woman parts which were disliked: Crotch shots of women high-jumping are shown while loudspeaker is announcing that high jump is a masochistic event. "Pussy" is used to insult a man, which is inherently derogatory towards women. Denny blows up Chris's shorts while she is

assisting him in bench lifts. Coach insultingly says that he could have coached a men's team. Denny watches Chris' legs under water. Coach pins Torrie to wall during party. Woman's overweight figure used for humor.

By far, the most frequent and emphatic comment was dissatisfaction with the portrayal of Chris and Torrie's relationship. Because they were isolated from any lesbian community and had no lesbian friends, outside pressures exceeded outside support. That they never discussed the relationship seemed out of line with generally sanctioned and exercised lesbian values. By not grounding their relationship in time and space, the film provided no satisfactory causes for it to succeed or fail. As one lesbian/feminist wrote,

"The movie gave the impression that being a lesbian required no more thought than who to date on a Saturday nite."

Lesbians are quick to note the limitations of a "lesbian" movie which provides no lesbian context for its characters. Likewise, any understanding of a lesbian/feminist audience requires discussion of context. The reasons why many of this sample gave the film an overall favorable rating and others did not reaches past PERSONAL BEST to the relation of lesbian/feminists to mass media and society.

LESBIANS, SOCIETY AND MASS MEDIA

If a world can be defined by a consciousness of itself, lesbians live in at least two worlds simultaneously. They are included in the first world by the fact of their humanness and the assumption of their heterosexuality. For centuries, this world has made lesbianism invisible, occasionally approaching it as a personal sickness to be cured or a social problem to be explained, but never actually reaching it or acknowledging it as an ongoing fact. As lesbianism is constantly denied in the first world, it becomes primary status in the second, a lesbian-created world, and the lesbian subculture.

Whereas straight people very rarely experience the lesbian subculture, lesbians constantly pass back and forth between the two worlds. In the past two decades, the gay liberation movement has forced straight people to cross the line at least in their awareness of homosexuality. Though this has in many cases increased tolerance of gays and exposed stereotypes, it has not been an open door to the gay subculture. As long as heterosexuality is synonymous with certain privileges and power, homosexuals will be distrustful of heterosexuals. Though many lesbians today do not fear retaliation were their lesbianism known, e.g. loss of job, rejection by straight friends, movements are transitory and liberation is relative.

Lesbians may fear less the losing of a particular job or friendship than a resurgence of repressive attitudes during their lifetime. While in the straight world, therefore, lesbians often take advantage of the heterosexual assumption to pass as straight themselves. Rather than

"acting straight," merely not fulfilling lesbian stereotypes is usually sufficient. Passing as straight does not decrease the importance to themselves of their lesbianism or their need for a lesbian world. Lesbians are usually sensitive enough to nuances to pass as straight and recognize other passing-as-straight lesbians. In addition, lesbians often purposely give off clues of their lesbianism, which are unnoticed except by other lesbians. This process of simultaneously passing as straight and exposing one's lesbianism to other lesbians, of claiming one's status as both human and lesbian, creates a meta-identity: a co-existing awareness of who you are and who others think you are.

This meta-identity also functions when lesbians experience mass media. Regardless of how accurately or inaccurately mass media represents straight society, it is created essentially for a heterosexual audience. The ideology it creates or reflects is heterosexist. This is an excellent example of the power and privileges afforded to heterosexuality in the larger world.

Unfortunately the denial of power, including economic power, in that world severely limits the ability of lesbians to create comparable subculture media for their own. Though there now exists, and has in past movements, an international feminist literary network, including women-owned and operated presses, publishing houses, distribution companies, periodicals and writers' guilds, which indeed provides a viable alternative in the print medium, the economic demands of filmmaking have limited widespread access to a parallel production network arising there.

More important, not even the most separatist lesbian is disengaged from the larger world. Lesbians participate on various levels in the larger exchange of commodities. Most lesbians include city newspapers and Hollywood movies among those commodities. As participants and economic/labor contributors in that larger world they wish to be equally served by it.

Vito Russo, in his book, *The Celluloid Closet*, amply demonstrates the typical treatment of gays in/by Hollywood movies. Not only are they underrepresented and misrepresented, but also they are consistently punished. Usually that punishment is severe, i.e. death, and it is presented as destiny. If a lesbian or pre-lesbian "fell" for this depiction of homosexual destiny and unworthiness, no doubt she would either commit suicide or "go straight." In fact, however, though a pessimistic and unflattering presentation is essentially the only one available in mass culture, lesbians do live healthy lives with surprisingly few lesbian-related problems.

Indeed, lesbians are, a "living" proof of the limitations of ideology. Initially without role models or even a name for their feelings and beliefs, they are still able to own them as valid and thus question the truth of ideology.

"Once information about lesbianism is secured, an individual

typically makes one of three types of resolution of (stigmatized) identity. First, a woman may identify with the social category and accept the given negative imagery as descriptive of self. Second, she may disidentify with the category. Third (and most prevalent among the women with whom I spoke), the individual may identify with the category but change the meaning of the category." (Barbara Ponse, *Identities in the Lesbian World*; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978, p. 139, my italics. Ponse interviewed 75 lesbian women from a gay organization in a southern U.S. city.)

Gradually, without the aid of heterosexist family traditions, school behavior codes or mass media, lesbians meet other lesbians, confirm and re-name their thoughts and enter a subculture where their experience is not denied.

The reaction of lesbians to mass media, then, is one which Roland Barthes would describe as "writerly," an active questioning and recreating of what is presented to them. It is not atypical of lesbians to rewrite a text as this lesbian does in *The Well of Loneliness*, the 1928 lesbian classic by Radclyffe Hall.

"I really identified with that book, but in the end when she gave up her lover to a man I thought to myself, 'It sure wouldn't be that way for me.' I just rewrote the end of the book in my head and made it come out the way I wanted it to! (laughter)." (Ponse, p. 141.)

Likewise, lesbians can watch the movie CAGED (a 1950 Hollywood film about lesbianism in prison), dismiss the stereotypes for what they are and creatively enjoy the narrative's community of women. Shall we say that lesbians are well trained for subversive reading?

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Personal Best, page 2

by Chris Straayer

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LESBIANS, FEMINISM AND MINORITY STRESS MANAGEMENT

Because sexual preference is not visually determinable whereas gender is usually obvious, most lesbians experience as much overt discrimination as women as they do as lesbians. This is not necessarily the case, of course, for those lesbians who choose to become recognizable by exhibiting nonconventional actions associated with lesbianism or with lesbian stereotypes such as same-sex affection in public or "mannish" apparel. This choice is not to be confused as "the amount of lesbianism" in them nor with any degree of femaleness or maleness. Even the 1950s "butch" was no more female or male than her corresponding "femme" but was only transgressing conventions. As such, she obtained certain male privileges as well as more anti-homosexual treatment from the general society. Interestingly, the more androgynous behaviors and attitudes exercised by many women today correlate positively with both increased professional success and mental health, according to several studies. (Virginia R. Brooks, *Minority Stress and Lesbian Women*, Lexington MA: D.C. Heath, 1981. Brooks analyzed approximately 600 questionnaires completed by U.S. lesbians.)

Whether or not lesbians have chosen to be recognizable, they have consistently contributed to movements for women's liberation. Continuing the energy and effort between movements, they are the "living" enactment of the feminist principle that the personal is political. Not married to men and therefore economically independent, adult lesbians compete with men in the realm of production. Not relating to men sexually, they refuse to be sexual or reproductive property.

Thus the very existence of lesbians challenges the basis of patriarchy, the economic and sexual oppression of women. Even lesbians with mainstream attitudes and less-political lifestyles necessarily contribute to this challenge. More political lesbians (like many in our sample) add a further challenge.

"Another group of social lesbians polarizes the sexual and social definitions of both lesbians and women. In other words, they point out the necessity of questioning 'social

femininity' for women. 'Sexual being' does not equal 'woman'. On the one hand, while upholding the importance of being a woman, they do not act in a way that is acceptable for a woman. For them, lesbianism is not primarily a sexual practice and women are not primarily sexual creatures who exist for men's pleasure. Lesbianism is a commitment to women in a male-dominated society. Furthermore, all women have the potential to be lesbians. This belief is their ultimate threat to society." (E.M. Ettorre, *Lesbians, Women and Society*, London: Routledge, 1980, p.28. Ettorre analyzed questionnaires from 201 lesbians and interviews with 60 lesbians in the London vicinity.)

Because all lesbians threaten patriarchy on some level, because their presence disrupts the "natural" organization of those in power, they are both disregarded and discriminated against. In addition to their oppression as women, lesbians are discriminated against economically and socially as a minority group. Church and State can and do deny them their right to own property, to marry same-sex, to raise children and to publicly declare their lesbianism. The medical and psychiatric professions (largely male and profiting from "women's madness") can deny them their physical and cognitive freedom. Social conventions and ideology control their "lesbian" behavior by isolating it in the private sphere. Mass media educate them to "proper" behavior in "straight territory." Even when a woman is open about her lesbianism she still must conform to numerous other behavior codes of straight society.

To live as a lesbian, then, produces constant stress. That stress is considerable whether one's primary status is human or lesbian, whether one is apologetic or political, whether one attempts to pass or to contest.

Mass media is a particularly important source of stress because of its pervasiveness. As publicity for and a celebration of sexism and heterosexism, it collapses the public and private spheres to challenge one's identity and perceptions. No longer is one's self-esteem dependent on only the reactions and attitudes of specific individuals to whom one does or does not reveal her lesbianism.

It would seem that this stress would cause an eventual demise of the individual, but, in fact, most lesbians find their lives to be relatively unproblematic specifically regarding their lesbianism. This is due to two basic factors: the strengthening function of the lesbian/feminist community and a high level of competency in stress management.

Unlike most other types of stress, minority stress usually continues for one's lifetime. This means that particular incidents related to one's lesbianism seldom exist without larger social and economic associations. At the same time, accumulated experiences can allow lesbians to develop effective coping responses.

In her study on minority stress and lesbians, Virginia Brooks found that a lesbian's identification of women or especially of lesbians as a

minority, reference group was associated with decreased stress reactions. By counteracting negative stereotypes, a lesbian "community" promotes self-esteem in the individual. Stress from the outside world is not eliminated but the lesbian is more able to cope with it.

In addition, a minority group can attempt to change its status in relation to society at large. Possible goals might include assimilation (to disappear as a group and to be judged only as individuals), pluralism (to maintain group identity while still acknowledging loyalty to the larger society) and separation (to establish the group's own society). A fourth goal, reform, seeks to alter minority status by changing society at large. It differs from assimilation and pluralism in that it recognizes the minority group's values and ethics as superior to that of the larger society. It differs from separation in that it sees liberation as requiring change in the oppressor.

(This basic organization is derived from Brooks. However, Brooks defines the fourth goal as domination, i.e., to reverse present status arrangements, which I strongly feel is not a minority group goal of lesbian/ feminists. Though a pride in matriarchal prehistory is common among lesbians, feminist ethics definitely takes a stand against all oppressions.)

All of these goals can be seen operating in survey responses to PERSONAL BEST. To be glad that the film was made and to credit it with being progressive reflect goals of assimilation and pluralism. Feminist subversive readings reflect both goals of pluralism and separation. Feminist critiques reflect goals of separation and reform.

In different periods of history, a minority group as a whole may adopt various goals as primary. At any one time, however, all four goals still will exist within the group as individuals' goals. Furthermore, any single individual changes goals through time. Rather than existing in a hierarchical and stagnant structure, these goals offer a dynamic path for both groups and individuals. Progress through them is not completed but instead repeated in a spiraling pattern. Most importantly, different goals frequently coexist with a single individual.

It is reasonable to suggest that any lesbian/ feminist viewer's response to PERSONAL BEST is the product of many influences besides the film's content and form. A thorough investigation would include the particular viewer's expectations of the film as it exists within her prior experience with mass media, her sensitivity to any stress caused by or referred to by the film, her pre-learned adaptive or maladaptive coping responses, her possible involvement in a lesbian subculture, and the current goals of that subculture as well as her own goals with regard to the dominant culture. All of these no doubt contributed to whether a viewer's final rating of PERSONAL BEST reflects a lesbian/feminist reading or a lesbian/ feminist critique. At the same time, the film no doubt attempts to diminish the influence of all these "external" factors. Total assimilation of all audiences is Hollywood's economic goal.

Lesbian/feminist viewers offer an interesting challenge to the concept of the subject formed in ideology. Of course, their status is defined by ideology, but their position simultaneously inside and outside of mainstream society certainly facilitates a critical consciousness.

PERSONAL BEST AND AUDIENCE STRESS

PERSONAL BEST's narrative concerns two women athletes, Chris and Torrie, who have a lesbian relationship. Though the relationship disintegrates, they are friends and teammates at the film's end. Their coach, who advocates a killer instinct approach to sports, insists that the women compete against each other, voices opposition to their relationship, encourages their separation, and finally attempts to seduce Chris. Chris resists Coach Tingloff's advances and instead gets involved with an ex-swimmer, Denny, who is spokesman for the "personal best" philosophy of sports. Chris thus ends up in a heterosexual relationship while Torrie remains lesbian-identified.

As Linda Williams points out, PERSONAL BEST uses its sports story to resolve its lesbian story. Much visual attention is given to female athletics and athletes throughout the film. Extreme close ups, montage editing and slow motion transform sports activity into a sensual visual experience. The film ends with Chris and Torrie both qualifying for the Olympic team via cooperative teamwork.

Classical narrative cinema has been likened to a dream mode, engaging the viewer on a subconscious level and removing her/him from any awareness of external reality except its manipulated representation by the film. The mimetic nature of film allows a fictional creation to stand in for reality while the darkened viewing environment separates each viewer from others as well as from the theatre dimensions and the world as a whole. Disruptions to this dreamlike arrangement are usually associated with avant-garde and political modes, which contain distancing devices such as interruptions to the narrative flow and foregrounding of film's artificiality.

I argue that distancing can arise from within the viewer as well. Statements from lesbian/feminists' viewers of PERSONAL BEST reveal an active resistance to the film's "authority." The stress activated by their presence in public/heterosexual space and the film's focus on their personal/lesbian identity both act as a natural defense against cinematic hypnosis. Their past experience with mainstream "lesbian" movies discourages any confusion of film with reality and in fact encourages a defensive stance. Still, they too watch movies for the purpose of enjoyment. Rather than total involvement or distancing, the lesbian/feminist viewer experiences PERSONAL BEST from an intermediate position where opposing forces work simultaneously to engage and distance her.

PERSONAL BEST attempts to engage lesbian/feminist as well as straight audiences. Its liberal content promises a narrative environment in which lesbians "want" to identify. At the same time, this lesbian

content threatens to distance a straight audience whose comfort requires that no essential challenge be waged to its homophobia. It could be argued that the film's visual display of athletics and athletes interrupts its lesbian narrative, thus distancing straight viewers from unwanted identification. Ultimately straight viewers can then be engaged in viewing both lesbianism and sports as erotic spectacles. PERSONAL BEST works to ameliorate stress for all audiences. Its complexity of form and content reinforces homophobia while seeming to contest it.

To avoid duplicating that stress in the lesbian audience necessitated by the heterosexual viewing space, PERSONAL BEST employs the two most common passing behaviors used by lesbians. In Alice E. Moses' *Identity Management in Lesbian Women* (New York: Praeger, 1978), Moses analyzed 81 questionnaires completed by lesbians in the U.S. The two behaviors most often used by these women to avoid being identified as lesbian were these: "Introduce partner as friend" — 76%; "Avoid talking about living situation" — 67%.

The film has Chris and Torrie present themselves to the world simply as friends. Open discussion of their love relationship is avoided. The two times that their relationship is discussed directly (between themselves in the car and by Coach Tingloff in his apartment), it is defined in strictly sexual terms. This is surely in tune with Chris and Denny's equally sexually motivated relationship; lesbianism "passes" as part of the sexual revolution.

A third passing arrangement, initiated by heterosexuals rather than lesbians, is prevalent in PERSONAL BEST. A "nothing unusual is happening here" stance can be used to deny a minority group's identity. Rather than being accepted by their peers, Torrie and Chris' relationship is ignored. This robs their kiss at the party of its "coming out" power. Even Denny, who first appears accepting, later tells Chris not to tell him anything about her earlier lesbian relationship. Tingloff is the only character, besides Torrie, who acknowledges the "unusual."

More important than passing behavior is PERSONAL BEST's complete avoidance of the two most stressful types of lesbian oppression/discrimination: economic and social. At no time during the film is Torrie's or Chris' professional status denied because of their lesbianism. Neither character is actually harassed by her peers for being lesbian. The stress that does exist with PERSONAL BEST's lesbian story, associated with Tingloff's aggression towards lesbianism and Chris' passive denial of it, in fact is of little magnitude. Coach Tingloff repeatedly tries to extend his power over Chris and Torrie into a personal realm. Though many lesbians experience sexual harassment on the job, most have necessarily eliminated it in the personal realm. Flirting men rarely present the threat to a lesbian relationship that is suggested by PERSONAL BEST's emphasis, via closeups on Chris' and Torrie's reactions to one another's "sports play" with Tingloff. Chris' romantic interest in males during a party sequence, while in Torrie's presence and

while still supposedly involved with Torrie, is presented as so naively innocent as to discredit not only Torrie's jealousy but lesbian relationships as well. The inaccuracy of such character naiveté goes unrecognized within the film due to its lack of a lesbian context.

PERSONAL BEST's avoidance of any lesbian community support system is possible because of its avoidance of any major economic and/ or social oppression. Both avoidances combine to isolate the individual lesbian character or viewer in "neutral" territory. Furthermore, the lack of a lesbian reference group within the film reinforces a strictly sexual definition of lesbianism, thus weakening any progressive presentation of lesbianism as an alternative, by restricting that alternative to a sexual plane as opposed to a lifestyle. This considerably soothes any stress men might feel in connection to the "manhating" myth of lesbianism.

PERSONAL BEST is composed of opposites and contradictions. Certain lesbian myths and stereotypes are deconstructed while others are reinforced. Often both manipulations occur with regard to the same myth or stereotype. Despite developed musculature, both Torrie and Chris are presented visually on the feminine side of androgyny (hair style, make-up, earrings); however, Torrie's hair is slicked back "butch-style" when "spying" on Chris and Denny in the restaurant. While the women's sports environment offers a situational explanation of lesbians, care is taken to present "normally" mixed party scenes. While Chris articulates resistance to the "all a lesbian needs is a good screw myth," she does, indeed, acquire happiness via the "good man." Lesbianism depicted by Chris is a stage, by Torrie a more permanent though problematic state. As one responder wrote,

"Torrie was shown as a 'real lesbian' and her character a sympathetic one although at the end somewhat depressing, i.e. not as good an athlete, alone once again ... certainly a mixed message."

Considering the homophobia rampant in mainstream ideology, the presence of lesbianism, even temporarily, likely would be stressful to men. PERSONAL BEST works on both narrative and extra-narrative levels to mollify that stress. Humor in PERSONAL BEST occurs on an extra-narrative level in the form of jokes which establish the superiority of those enjoying the jokes. The fact that these jokes exist essentially as verbal extra-narrative inserts suggests that the corresponding superior beings also exist outside the narration. Hence, though all of PERSONAL BEST's jokes are told by characters at least on half of whom are women, they exist for those in the audience who by right could tell such jokes. Not surprisingly, then, they are sexist (a guy stretches his belly button up and down to imitate a woman hurdler's crotch), heterosexist (Tingloff relates a story of a marine throwing a fag out of a 44th story window and the fag then saying to the marine, "I'm not mad"), and racist (a woman in the steam bath imitates a man masturbating to explain why he is squint-eyed and buck-toothed).

Humor from the narrative level of PERSONAL BEST depends more on

physical superiority. Much of it does, however, also reinforce the sexism of the extra-narrative jokes (a fat woman is used for humor twice and Tingloff calls a male runner a "pussy" when Chris passes him on the track).

PERSONAL BEST's humor relies on tension and functions for its release. Two types of tension are addressed: physical and sexual. Scenes of extreme physical exertion are often followed with physical jokes. A prime example of this is the scene of Chris and Torrie's running up the dune in slow motion finally to reveal Coach Tingloff's sitting at the top dressed like a Florida tourist and drinking beer. To the audience, who emotionally has been struggling up the dune with Chris and Torrie, the reentry of relaxation (their own attempted state as movies goers) is a pleasure, a relief, a joke. Note that when Tingloff motions the two women to continue running, the audience is not made to follow them.

Similarly though less obviously, because heterosexist humor takes place mainly on the extra-narrative level, the attention paid by characters to the opposite sex and to heterosexuality is a relief to the tension produced by the films temporary presentation of lesbianism. The marine and fag joke occurs during the scene in Tingloff's apartment. Tension is high not only because he has just succeeded in forcing apart Chris and Torrie but because he now has Chris trapped in his space (he refuses to let her answer the phone), she is physically handicapped, and he is both hostile and aggressive. When sexual aggression is in the air, the idea of a masochistic victim (fag) functions as a relief. Even though this joke was used narratively by Tingloff to imply that Chris' involvement with Torrie was masochistic, its position in the narrative action closely preceded his aggression towards Chris, giving it motivational power on a subliminal level. The joke actually reveals Tingloff's relationship with/attitude to Chris. Sexual humor exists in PERSONAL BEST for heterosexual men, to excuse their reactions to lesbians.

Humor for lesbian/feminists predominantly lies in the film's narration. One survey question asked what parts of PERSONAL BEST the responders found funny. 22% of these answers indicated that they found nothing in the film funny. Other responses included the following as things they found funny: the gay aesthetic of the goose lamp; Chris and Torrie's run up the dune to the relaxed Tingloff; come-uppances such as Denny's hitting his head in the swimming pool, Denny's embarrassment when Chris holds his penis in the bathroom and Chris' greater weight lifting ability; playfulness shared by Chris and Torrie such as driving the car in a U-turn and onto the curb; and absurd/ ridiculous/ unrealistic scenes such as Chris and Torrie's tickling: "Is that really what they think we do?"

In contrast, lesbian/feminists demonstrated an inverse relation to PERSONAL BEST's extra-narrative humor. The sample was asked if they liked, disliked or didn't remember four jokes from the movie: the belly button/ lady hurdler joke; the squint eyes and buck teeth/ masturbation joke; the fag and marine joke; the yank finger/fart joke. Of

all responses to all four jokes, 48% were "don't remember," 44% were "disliked" and only 8% were "liked." Of the 8% positive responses, most (84% of those) were in response to the yank finger/ fart joke which they said exhibited intimacy between the two women. One responder who could not remember most of the jokes said,

"I disliked almost all of the jokes in the movie but chose to ignore them because I wanted to enjoy the movie. That's probably why I don't remember them."

Interestingly, the one male who completed a survey, which was not used in calculations for this study, remembered all four jokes and liked them all. Of course one male responder cannot be statistically relevant here, but this extreme variation from *any* of the 44 female responders suggests a direction for further study.

PERSONAL BEST employs humor as a stress reducing strategy. Within the narrative, humor softens its Freudian themes for lesbians and its feminist themes for men. On the extra-narrative level, it serves mainly men. The blatant sexism and heterosexism of many of the jokes defuses the stress of the heterosexual male audience, while the extra-narrative status of these jokes refuses to anchor them within the text. They are free floating and can be ignored or utilized by various audience members according to whether they provoke or alleviate stress.

In addition to humor, PERSONAL BEST develops the narrative to ameliorate, specifically for men, the very stress it creates. As with most comedies, this film restricts its challenge to the status quo to the beginning and middle parts. By the end, it reestablishes that status quo. Disruptions in the status quo, namely in the superiority and assumed universality of heterosexuality in our culture, are associated in PERSONAL BEST with the characters of Chris and Torrie. Defending the status quo against those disruptions is Tingloff. Reestablishment of the status quo is associated with Chris and Denny.

The Tingloff character acts as a scapegoat. He alone personifies heterosexist homophobia in PERSONAL BEST. It is he who finally voices what all heterosexists wait to hear: the denigration of lesbianism to the single level of sexuality and the subsequent attack on that sexuality. Tingloff acts out jealousy and reveals his fantasy of forced heterosexuality. Finally, it is Tingloff who is rebelled against by Chris and Torrie and defeated by Chris and Denny. His function is to represent sexism and heterosexism and receive the justified anger directed against it. So efficiently does his character function that he absorbs much feminist rage at other aspects of the movie as well. That feminist audience anger (at sexism such as the movie's crotch shots) is directed back into the fictional world, even if towards a male character, is ultimately beneficial to heterosexist goals.

The narrative of PERSONAL BEST officially endorses heterosexuality via the defection of its main character, Chris, from homosexuality to heterosexuality as the film moves to a "happy ending." Needless to say,

Torrie, though treated kindly in the end, moves from romantic involvement to inactivity and as a subcharacter is given less and less time as the movie proceeds.

Another major development in PERSONAL BEST, important for the soothing of male audience members, is Denny's replacement of Tingloff in the narrative structure. Whereas Tingloff represents heterosexism, Denny represents "tolerance." His appearance halfway through the narrative is necessary on several counts. First, he extricates the audience males from guilt by gender association with Tingloff. Secondly, via him, "tolerance" enters the film *after* the active lesbianism is over.

Thirdly and most importantly, Denny is needed to *replace* Tingloff so that the male gender can change its "character traits" without male audience members experiencing (via identification) the process of change. For a male such as Tingloff to change into a male such as Denny requires intellectual conflict. Since PERSONAL BEST avoids conflict, two male characters are required to enact a change in male position within the narrative.

PERSONAL BEST parades as a progressive film challenging conservative views on femininity and sexuality. Its management of conflict, however, insures against any real threat to tradition. On two planes, women's strength vs. women's oppression and homosexuality vs. heterosexism, opposite positions are provided, but care is taken to avoid their collision. Nowhere in the film is its presentation of women as both sex objects and capable aggressive athletes acknowledged as a contradiction. "Strong" women are just as available for objectification as are more feminine types. Lesbianism and heterosexism conflict briefly in the scene of Chris and Tingloff in his apartment. The conflict is circumvented before it makes demands on the heterosexual or male viewer's mind. Friendship replaces homosexuality and Denny replaces Tingloff. The male viewer can identify with both good guy and bad guy without actually wrangling with either position. No real change occurs within any single male character.

Chris, as PERSONAL BEST's main character, acts as the female role model and is expected to change. In her change is the ultimate amelioration of stress caused in male viewers by her earlier homosexual attachment. The lesbian story in PERSONAL BEST is a closed structure. Males need not fear that Chris will betray them in the future for another lesbian relationship.

Lesbianism is presented as a stage by PERSONAL BEST through the story of its main character. The presentation relies on now clichéd Freudian theories relating to the female child's process of changing her primary attraction towards the female gender (her mother) to an attraction towards the male gender (heterosexual lover). When sexuality and immaturity overlap, as they do for the Chris character early in PERSONAL BEST, the result is lesbianism, a stage to grow out of naturally. Chris' initial immaturity in PERSONAL BEST, her daughterly need for Torrie's nurturing, her penis envy suggested in the film via

humor. Her final move simultaneously into heterosexuality and maturity absolutely reinforce a Freudian explanation. She is delivered into the arms of a man not as a bisexual but as a heterosexual. End of story.

That is, end of story one. As stated earlier, lesbians' existence in more than one world prepares them for reading more than one story. Though undoubtedly Chris is the main character of PERSONAL BEST's intended narrative, Torrie is the main character of its subversive lesbian/ feminist reading. One lesbian/feminist wrote,

"I can't believe the way Patrice Donnelly (Torrie) has been virtually ignored in the media. They're always focusing in on Hemingway (Chris)."

By lesbian/feminist viewers, Chris was perfunctorily dismissed as "immature." Torrie was their "real" star. They liked looking at her and they liked being represented by her. Eighty-one percent of survey responses indicated identification with the Torrie character. Eighty-five per cent indicated liking the Torrie character more.

With Torrie as main character, a new story is not difficult to imagine. The most important development in the movie is her rising intact after an unsuccessful relationship. Without the support of a lesbian community, without even the normal talking-through expected of any relationship, Torrie survives the loss of her love, her only lesbian comrade. In the atmosphere of this movie, her final line, "He's Ok ... for a guy," is an act of strength that any lesbian struggling under dominant heterosexist ideology would appreciate. Several lesbian/feminists read on from here to a reestablishment of Chris and Torrie's relationship.

CONCLUSION: A POLITICAL CONTEXT

I have tried in this article to further a discussion on the film viewing experience, particularly on how cultural subgroups within audiences negotiate enjoyment of films as long as those films avoid real conflict. I have tried to relate how lesbian/feminist readings and critiques exist within history and society.

For a lesbian/feminist audience, PERSONAL BEST contains both progressive and oppressive elements though its structure serves a heterosexist male audience. Though the majority of a lesbian/feminist sample reported having liked the film, further investigation revealed that those women, like others in the sample who disliked the film, were sensitive to and angered by specific sexist and heterosexist parts. A favorable general response is not to be interpreted as a favorable response to all parts. Multiple readings were operating. The sample was more in agreement over particular parts, however, than in general responses. The differences in final opinions relate to multiple complex factors operating in each individual. These individuals were active viewers producing either (or more commonly both) a feminist reading or a feminist critique. For feminists, it is now necessary to consider

feminist readings and feminist critiques from a political perspective.

Film is usually accepted as a one-way communication. The audience talks only with money, a simple yes or no. In such a system it matters little to the producers whether the audience is enjoying a film or enjoying its rewrite of that film. Both cost the same. Likewise, neither feminist reading nor feminist critique is a political act unless articulated outside — the subculture. Within the subculture it is easy to lose track of the common oppressor and fall into false divisions, such as those who like vs. those who dislike PERSONAL BEST. PERSONAL BEST would then be manipulating us much like the misplaced marker "accidentally" disrupted Chris and Torrie's relationship.

To understand various responses to PERSONAL BEST, two points are most important:

1. the lesbian/feminist audience surveyed was not in disagreement regarding the film's sexism;
2. feminist readings and feminist critiques are both appropriate responses which relate more to the individual's present position within an ever-changing stress response/goal definition dynamic than to her degree of allegiance to the subculture's political goals.

After all, the subculture's political goals are comprised of individual goals and are undoubtedly anti-sexist and anti-heterosexist. To rate one or the other viewer response as more political from an aggressive position or as too "heavy" from a defensive position is to overlook their complementary functions. A feminist critique may be more combative but expends energy. A feminist reading usurps the oppressor's energy. Together they initiate and strengthen a cycle of resistance.

This is not to imply that feminist readings and feminist critiques are equally rebellious. A feminist critique designates the film as a target for anti-sexist attack while a feminist reading is a refusal to act as a target for the film's sexism. The feminist reading is a political action only so far as it provides energy for feminist political action in other directions.

Likewise, this endorsement of feminist readings and feminist critiques does not imply that every woman's response to PERSONAL BEST is necessarily feminist. The sample used for this paper may be uncommonly feminist. The present wave of feminism is rapidly being answered with backlash, and lesbian/feminists may be moving towards a goal of assimilation. Rather, what is concluded here is that any act, including viewer response, can be understood only within personal, social, historical and political contexts.

To view feminist readings and feminist critiques as an opposition is to divert conflict with a common outside oppressor to internal conflict. Simultaneously, to view them as identical is to equate a withdrawal into safety with a surging beyond constraints. Though successful revolution depends on the fortification of its proponents, such fortification is not revolutionary in itself. It is the sum total of individually effective acts

that makes for successful change. Sustenance affects the effectiveness of those acts by providing potential energy. It is kinetic energy, however, that forwards liberation.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Lianna Liberal Lesbianism

by Lisa DiCaprio

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As with *PERSONAL BEST*, *LIANNA* (written, filmed and directed by John Sayles), has been hailed by many critics as presenting an accurate portrayal of lesbian culture. Promotional material has described the film in these terms:

"LIANNA ... looks and sounds authentic. Its neither slick, like *MAKING LOVE* nor does it pretend to be about something else, like *PERSONAL BEST*." (Vincent Canby, *New York Times*).

"An unusually intelligent and compassionate view of a woman's coming to terms with her sexuality and herself, done with taste and understanding" (Judith Crist, *WOR-TV*).

Reviews in the alternative press such as *In These Times* have been no less positive:

"John Sayles' new movie is certainly and triumphantly about lesbians. Because he gets it so exactly right, I assume he has a good informant on the inside and a writer's ability to imagine his own way to the interior of someone else's experience" (Barbara Presley Noble, *In These Times*).

Predictably, *LIANNA* has provoked as much controversy among feminist and lesbian viewers as did *PERSONAL BEST*. In reviewing either film, it is necessary to establish a common point of reference. Do we judge these works from a historical perspective? In the past 20 years, only three major Hollywood films have been produced in which lesbian characters are primary: *THE CHILDREN'S HOUR* (1962), *THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE* (1968) and *THE FOX* (1968).

These films all dealt with lesbian relationships as being shameful. For example, in *THE CHILDREN'S HOUR*, Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine are accused of having "sinful sexual knowledge of one

another" and MacLaine ultimately commits suicide. Neither PERSONAL BEST nor LIANNA assume such a condemnatory attitude toward lesbians. Within a historical framework, LIANNA represents a sympathetic portrayal of lesbians, but it is a sympathy shaped by a liberal perspective. The ultimate result of this perspective promotes an ideology of tolerance, rather than liberation.

From an artistic standpoint, LIANNA falls to accomplish even Sayles' own stated goals. In a review published in *In These Times*, Sayles denied any overwhelming political motivation behind his film explaining,

"I just tried to get across the character. For instance, in Lianna's first love scene with a woman I wanted to communicate what she was feeling."[\(1\)](#)

Toward the end, Sayles employed a deliberately garbled tape of French conversation as a voice over. However, the tape served more to distract rather than to heighten the believability of the scene. Sayles' utilization of the tape points to the way that LIANNA is written very much from the outsider's viewpoint. Whatever Sayles' intentions were, the most striking characteristic of the lovemaking scene in his film is the absence of any real passion expressed between the two women.

For the most part, Sayles has created one-dimensional characters lacking in emotional depth.[\(2\)](#) Essentially, he fails to explore the complexities involved in lesbian relations. The usual weight of social ostracism faced by lesbians becomes further compounded in Lianna's case by the fact that she is married and is the mother of two children. Sayles, however, seems unable or unwilling to dramatize the conflicts which would inevitably occur within such a situation. As will be shown, the common thread which runs throughout LIANNA is the view that heterosexual and lesbian relations are the same in their most fundamental aspects. While the film avoids some of the crudest anti-lesbian imagery, at the same time it confirms other stereotypes of women and lesbians, presenting lesbian relations in such a way as to preclude a radical presentation of the issues.

An attractive young woman in her early 30s, Lianna is married to her former instructor, a film professor in the university's English department. Lianna states early in the film, "I started out majoring in English and became a wife instead." Interested in continuing her education, Lianna enrolls in an adult education class on child psychology taught by a visiting professor, Ruth Brennan. Lianna is obviously captivated by Ruth, an older woman in her late 40s with an established reputation in her field. Most of the women at the university are either students or wives whose lives have become an appendage to their husband's career. Ruth provides the model of a woman who has the independence and self-confidence absent in Lianna. Lianna remains after class one night to express her admiration for Ruth's teaching ability and offers to assist Ruth in her research. Ruth invites Lianna to her apartment to discuss the details of their work. In the course of several hours of discussion, Ruth confides her past love for a woman.

Through this revelation, she assumes the risk of initiating a physical relationship with Lianna.

It is interesting to compare this moment in LIANNA with the comparable scene in PERSONAL BEST. In a review published in JUMP CUT, Linda Williams writes,

"In PERSONAL BEST, the track and field sports context of the narrative permits an emphasis is on the physical and sensual that renders the women's erotic relationship a 'natural' by-product of their highly physical existence."[\(3\)](#)

Williams concludes,

"This is the source of the almost overwhelming acceptance of the film's acceptance of the normally taboo subject of homosexual love."[\(4\)](#)

In PERSONAL BEST, the first lovemaking scene occurs as the outgrowth of an arm-wrestling contest between the two athletes. In LIANNA, Ruth expresses her physical attraction for Lianna during an intimate discussion. Lianna remains almost expressionless as Ruth moves closer and begins to gently stroke her face. While LIANNA does not employ the physicality of sports as the context for the expression of sexual love between two women, because Lianna exhibits such passivity in this scene, it tends to reinforce the stereotype of an older lesbian's seducing a younger woman.

Overall, the film presents Lianna's relationship with Ruth as a natural response to a positive approach by another woman. Lianna accepts an option which presents itself when her marriage is clearly near its end. Earlier the film had portrayed her husband Dick as unsympathetic, with an overwhelming preoccupation with advancing his own career. He proprietarily takes over Lianna's time and energy. She resents being drawn into the obligatory social life of the "professor's wife." He resents it when she would rather attend Ruth's class than one of the many parties which he must go to.

Yet, the film presents the internal dynamics of Lianna's relationship to Ruth in many ways similar to those of her marriage. Lianna does not significantly transform herself. She falls back on the familiar role of research assistant, thus duplicating the dependent relation she had with her husband. However, Lianna's relation to the outside world does undergo a qualitative change, which rapidly transforms her life. Most dramatically, Lianna now sees the world around her through lesbian rather than heterosexual eyes. Several scenes establish Lianna's newly affirmed lesbian sexuality. In one, we see her gazing at other women on the street, as she lets herself express her previously suppressed physical attraction to women.

The film shows Lianna's confrontation with the intensely negative attitudes toward lesbians held by mainstream U.S. culture. She first

meets the reality of homophobia when her husband Dick returns from a trip, during which time she and Ruth had taken advantage of his absence to consolidate their relationship. Both women agree to discretion, but in the middle of an angry exchange with Dick, Lianna confesses that she is having an affair. Her husband demands, "Was he the man of your dreams?" Lianna responds, "It was not a man. It was a woman," and names Ruth Brennan as her lover. Dick responds with laughter and anger, revealing his deep fear of and contempt for lesbians. When Lianna responds in turn that he too has had affairs with students, he answers, "But at least they were with the right sex." Dick issues an ultimatum that Lianna must move out.

The principal effect of this scene is to establish Lianna as an "impetuous" character. Throughout the film, Lianna exhibits a particular innocence and naiveté which leaves her extremely emotionally vulnerable.⁽⁵⁾ She is consistently oblivious to the social consequences of her acts, especially social attitudes towards lesbians. Why did she specifically identify Ruth as her lover? Goaded by her husband, she felt she had to shock him with specific details. Generally alluding to a relation with another woman would not have had the same dramatic impact. However, by naming Ruth, Lianna placed Ruth in a position of jeopardy. Dick could easily use the information to discredit Ruth professionally in the small town atmosphere of university life.

As further evidence of her naiveté, Lianna tells Ruth about her imminent divorce, assuming they will now live together. Ruth quickly dispels these illusions, stating that with such a living arrangement, "Everyone would know." Here, we can identify with both Lianna's spontaneity and Ruth's caution. The exigencies of daily life constantly force lesbians to suppress their desire to express physical affection. In a sense, the film presents Lianna and Ruth as a study in opposites. In her impetuosity, Lianna expresses the liberating experience of acting on her newly realized lesbian identity. Ruth, on the other hand, represents a woman who probably "came out" in the late 1950s during a particularly repressive period in the United States when the nuclear family was monolithic and authority generally unquestioned. Although "old gay" organizations such as Daughters of Bilitis would have given support to a lesbian of Ruth's age, only with the emergence of the contemporary women's movement was a full-scale assault launched on traditional sexual roles in our society. This movement provided the framework for a more positive assertion of lesbian identity and culture than was previously possible.⁽⁶⁾ Years of living a dual existence have resulted in Ruth's resigning herself more to her situation while Lianna, only recently coming to know society's condemnation of lesbians, constantly feels frustrated at having to suppress her physical impulses.

On Ruth's insistence, then, Lianna must live alone once she leaves her husband. She and Dick seem to agree to give him custody of the children. Here Sayles' treatment of Lianna seems most implausible. He portrays Lianna's relationship with her children as positive and shows a touching scene in which Lianna carefully brushes her daughter Theda's

hair. Yet he characterizes Lianna as experiencing only minimal conflict when Theda pleads tearfully, "Why can't I come with you?" Then later in the film, Lianna misinterprets Theda's unwillingness to speak to her when they meet by chance in front of a theater and assumes that Theda's reserve comes from Dick's having informed the children of her lesbian relation with Ruth. Rather, clearly Theda feels betrayed and abandoned simply because her mother has left, without considering the specifics of Lianna's new relation to Ruth.

Although married for at least 13 years and the mother of two children, Lianna acts as if she had been married only briefly and had no children. Even though Ruth's field is child psychology, she and Lianna never discuss Lianna's children. Such discussion would have provided the film a means to examine the particular stigma society attaches to lesbian mothers, against whom the epithet of "unfit mother" is hurled. Sayles states in his interview that to include children in the film "was one of the most important things for me, because that complicates the issue for most people."[\(7\)](#) However, the film so casually treats Lianna's relation to her children that it actually tends to reinforce the popular stereotype that being a lesbian and a responsible mother are mutually exclusive. *KRAMER VS KRAMER* already gave the message that pursuing a career and motherhood are incompatible. Whether Sayles intended to or not, he has made the same point in relation to lesbians and motherhood.[\(8\)](#)

The film presents Lianna and Ruth's relation as developing within a vacuum, with no emotional conflicts intruding from Lianna's past. Only Ruth's past commitments influence their relationship's outcome as Ruth informs Lianna that she has another lover in the city that is her home. This revelation comes as a complete shock to Lianna, as she has given up her husband, children, and friends out of her love for Ruth. Ruth understands the inequities between them — age, experience, and career. Ruth's interest in Lianna may have been limited to physical attraction, rather than mutuality. She refers to her lover Jan as an older woman, the head of her department, and someone with whom she has undergone a great deal. In contrast, her relation to Lianna lacks emotional substance. At first glance, it would be easy to judge Ruth as irresponsible she seems to initiate a relationship and then not be prepared or willing to deal with the consequences. However, we find the clue to Ruth's behavior when she tells Lianna that she assumed Lianna's attraction to her was in the spirit of exploring the possibilities of a lesbian relationship. Ruth has expected that Lianna would remain married and that they would have an affair in which both would maintain their primary relations. Ruth then announces that she is returning home to discuss the matter with Jan.

Now, Sayles shows Lianna facing the fear of being alone as she experiences intense feelings of dependency, typical of the early stages of love. Perhaps by showing Lianna nearly emotionally devastated, Sayles provides here a negative portrayal of lesbian relations. Another interpretation is that by showing Lianna at this point in her life, waiting to find out whether or not Ruth has rejected her, the film can develop

Lianna as a character confirming her lesbian identity outside of her specific relation with Ruth. Lianna rejects the advances of a close male friend who assumes that since she is now "free," they can act on the physical attraction he assumes is mutual. Lianna says she sees him only as a friend with no sexual interest, a revelation he finds difficult to accept. Here, the film shows men's common assumptions about "unattached women," especially women recently divorced or separated.

Additionally, Lianna does not waver about leaving her husband and does not return for solace when her relation with Ruth is in jeopardy, even though she no longer has her old friends to turn to for emotional support. For example, informed that Lianna is a lesbian, her best friend Sandy confides to Jerry that she had to examine hers and Lianna's entire relationship to question if there were "anything more" than an intimate friendship.

Left to her own resources, Lianna decides to return to a lesbian bar, which Ruth had first taken her to. The first time they went, Lianna exclaimed incredulously, "But they are all women." Now, she has overcome that initial intimidation and even responds positively to the sexual advances of another woman. The film gives here a glimpse of the strengths and weaknesses of the lesbian bar scene. On the one hand, bars serve as a "safe" environment where lesbians can openly express physical affection without fear of condemnation. At the same time, the bar serves as a ghetto, and there it is difficult to find emotional companionship, since women communicate there mainly on a physical, non-verbal level.⁽⁹⁾ It is not surprising, then, that Lianna is approached by someone very different from her — a member of the Air Force. Lianna loves Ruth, yet in Ruth's absence, she regains a certain level of self-confidence by becoming sexually involved with another woman. On her return, Ruth sees this new development as positive, since she has always said that Lianna's lesbian identity extended beyond their particular relation.

In the end, Ruth decides to leave Lianna. In contrast to *PERSONAL BEST* in which Chris leaves Tory for a man, Ruth is leaving Lianna to return to another woman. In the final scene, Lianna and her old friend Sandy meet at the park bench where the film began. Sandy has come to terms with her own prejudices towards lesbians. She says she cannot "understand" lesbians but loves Lianna as a friend. The film closes on an image of the two women in a close physical embrace.

What overall impact does a film such as *LIANNA* have? According to its producer Maggie Renzi, its purpose was "to give people new information or a new way to think."⁽¹⁰⁾ To what insight does *LIANNA* bring the viewer? Since *THE CHILDREN'S HOUR*, we have witnessed the rise of a women's movement which has posed a fundamental challenge to sexual roles as well as the rise of gay and lesbian movements which have questioned the compulsory nature of heterosexuality in our society. Yet, *LIANNA* presents a vision more appropriate to the outlook of "old gay" organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine

Society, whose goals were essentially limited to achieving public acceptance, rather than personal and political liberation.

In her *In These Times* review, Barbara Presley Noble writes,

"Since why Lianna loves women isn't any more explicable than why some women love men — or anyone loves anyone, for that matter, Sayles concentrates on the details of lesbian culture."

This "inexplicable" character of Lianna's love for another woman precisely characterizes the liberal view of lesbians. The film does not show Lianna's agonizing over her new identity because, in Sayles' view, her affair with Ruth is just "another relationship" — this time, with a woman. According to Sayles, society should not make distinctions between lesbian and heterosexual relations.⁽¹¹⁾ To say that justice lies in the leveling of differences serves to diminish women's and lesbians' special needs.

It is not surprising then that Lianna and Ruth's relation exists in a social and political vacuum. Sayles portrays lesbian relations only as a choice, to be understood within the narrow framework of one woman's response to the particular circumstances of her life. LIANNA does not give the viewer any indication of why such a "rational" choice would be met with such fierce hostility from society, except to imply that homophobia is based on irrational fears and attitudes — the product of a conservative sexual morality. The film's basic structure only explores *individual* responses to Lianna's new lesbian identity. We are shown the reactions of her husband, children, and friends.

However, LIANNA excludes from consideration the larger economic, political, and cultural forces which are responsible for determining and shaping the experience of lesbians. The film deprives lesbian oppression of any real political meaning; instead, we are to regard it as a purely individual, private issue. From Sayles' perspective, the solution to lesbian oppression lies merely in challenging prevailing views of lesbians, as if change can take place within the realm of ideas alone without challenging existing institutions. This is the real meaning of Lianna and Sandy's reconciliation. It provides a touching moment. But it has the ultimate effect of defining a lesbian relation as a barrier that Sandy will never cross as she relegates Lianna to the category of "other." This is the essence of the liberal conception of lesbians which promotes tolerance but does not question the institution of compulsory heterosexuality itself.

In producing LIANNA, Sayles has chosen a controversial subject for mainstream culture, but he has presented the issue of lesbian relations in such a way as to actually contain political controversy. For many heterosexuals, LIANNA will undoubtedly be viewed as an informative' but non-threatening film. From a lesbian perspective, LIANNA represents a form of exploitation — a depiction which only serves to compound further general misconceptions about the lesbian experience.

A WOMAN LIKE EVE

If LIANNA presents its main character as a woman who appears suspended in time and space, an earlier film, *A WOMAN LIKE EVE* provides a significant alternative. Based on a screenplay by Nouchka van Brakel and filmed with a largely female crew, this Dutch film dramatizes the changes in a woman's life when she decides to leave her husband and becomes the lover of a French lesbian living in a commune. In one sense, *A WOMAN LIKE EVE* faces the same criticism as does LIANNA in that the basis for the women's relation seems to lack emotional depth. However, *A WOMAN LIKE EVE* deals with the external realities of a lesbian relation very differently. *A WOMAN LIKE EVE* is very much a film made from a woman's perspective and directed to a women's audience.

While in Sayles' film, a mother's responsibilities and her lesbian relations appear to pose no conflict, it is precisely the emotional turmoil of such a situation which *A WOMAN LIKE EVE* portrays with rare sensitivity. Eve has two children, but she decides from the outset of the separation from her husband to retain custody of them. She fights a court battle which she ultimately loses. In preparing Eve for her initial court appearance, her lawyer says not to mention her lesbian relationship. However, in a typically vindictive outburst, Eve's husband brings out this fact. Eve refuses to deny her new lesbian identity, stating emphatically that whom she chooses for a lover has no bearing on her maternal competence. Accepting Eve's argument that she has had the primary responsibility for her children and should be allowed to continue as the main parent, the court awards Eve temporary custody.

The film then examines how Eve's maternal role affects her love relation with her lover, Lilianna. A social worker is assigned to investigate the new living arrangement. Eve acknowledges that she in some way sees Lilianna as a "father" whom she wants to be more a part of her family. However, Eve also recognizes that Lilianna resists such a role and that this is that woman's prerogative. Because of custody problems, although Lianna prefers that Eve live with her in the commune, for Eve this is not a viable option. Eve's lover often expresses resentment at the fact that Eve's prior responsibilities and strong emotional ties to her children define their relation. The film presents each woman's perspective in a balanced and sympathetic way. The temporary custody arrangement is portrayed as problematic, but Eve and her lover seem committed to working out the best possible solution.

Eve's husband abruptly announces that he is soon to be remarried — to Eve's best friend. He challenges the custody arrangement. He argues that, remarried, he can provide his children a "proper" heterosexual family. Eve passionately reiterates her original position that single or not, lesbian or heterosexual, she remains the mother of her two children. This time, however, Eve loses.

In the final scene, we see Eve carrying suitcases and preparing to board

a train, presumably to the commune where Lianna lives. At the last moment, she decides not to leave. Although she has lost custody of her children, Eve prefers to remain in the same city so that she can visit them. While Sayles' film very much mutes the social consequences of Lianna's actions, *A WOMAN LIKE EVE* emphasizes the painful choices that society forces on lesbians, especially on lesbian mothers. On the most crucial points, *A WOMAN LIKE EVE* succeeds where *LIANNA* fails. It provides us with an engaging drama which illustrates in a compelling way how the dynamics of a lesbian relationship are shaped by the harsh realities of a deeply homophobic society.

Notes

1. John Sayles, "John, Maggie, and Lianna," interview with Pat Aufderheide, *In These Times*, March 9-22, p. 12. The tape utilized by Sayles for this scene was originally the background for a heterosexual lovemaking scene in the French film, *HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR* scripted by the French feminist Margeurite Duras. What is communicated by the use of this same tape in *LIANNA* is that for Sayles the lesbian experience is foreign one that he is able to convey only from a heterosexual point of reference.
2. The character that perhaps "works best" in *LIANNA* is a male friend of Lianna who attempts to seduce her after she has left her husband. He is played by Sayles himself.
3. "PERSONAL BEST: Women in Love," *JUMP CUT*, No. 27 (1983), p. 11.
4. Ibid.
5. It is interesting to consider why Sayles portrayed Lianna as being so consistently naive. In an interview in *Film*, Mar. 4, 1983, Sayles has stated that his film is not about lesbians per se, but about society's response to one woman choosing a lesbian relationship. However, the fact that Lianna retains her innocence to the very end means that she does not achieve any significant personal growth. The film therefore deprives the viewer of a more complex rendition of a character who suddenly must face a new factor in her life (in this case, lesbian oppression) and come to terms with it. At the end of the film, Lianna does not seem to have incorporated any new perspective into her life. She is instead presented as the victim of a lover who has rejected her. In his portrayal of the main protagonist as a naive and passive woman, Sayles reinforces a conservative stereotype about the female role.
6. For a description of this period, see "Reminiscences of Two Female Homophiles" by Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, as published in *Our Right to Love, A Lesbian Resource Book* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 124. The authors write, "The climate of the fifties was not the climate of the seventies. DOB [Daughters of Bilitis] members feared disclosure of their sexual orientation more than anything else."

[7.](#) Sayles, *In These Times*, p. 22.

[8.](#) This view of a mother's asserting her independence by essentially abandoning her children either for a career or a personal relationship appears almost to be the reverse view of women's enacting the *Playboy* philosophy, as it was analyzed in a recent book by Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*. According to Ehrenreich, *Playboy* was instrumental in creating an ideology which encouraged men to forsake family responsibilities in order to maximize their pursuing individual satisfaction in their career choices and personal relations.

[9.](#) In a review published in *off our backs*, Angela Marney criticizes the exaggerated nature of Sayles' bar scene:

“I am at a loss to remember when a gathering of women has ever been portrayed with such lechery — Sayles has encouraged one of the most common stereotypes about lesbians, that because they are sexually attracted to women, they act upon that attraction in the same way that heterosexual men do” (April, 1983, p. 18).

[10.](#) Sayles, *In These Times*, p. 22.

[11.](#) Ibid. p. 13.

What You Take for Granted... Work in a white man's world

by JoAnn Elam

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The Women's Movement consistently criticizes the division of labor between men and women, with women's work being limited to domestic (private) space. For a woman, entering the workforce often means doing more cleaning, cooking, and adult-male-care — the same duties she performs in domestic space — for low pay instead of no pay. The Women's Movement has challenged this with demands for affirmative action and equal pay. Many women, feminists or not, have entered jobs and fields heretofore restricted to men.

Michelle Citron's *WHAT YOU TAKE FOR GRANTED...* is an explicitly feminist film. Through a truly original interplay of form and content, it accurately shows how the social and political reality of token women in "men's jobs" is reflected in their daily lives and relations. The reality is that it's a white man's world. Women who venture onto men's territory live with male hostility, competition, isolation, and weariness. Citron combines the documentary and narrative forms, creating six fictitious women characters and showing them in documentary-style filmed interviews. The characters first appear in a series of shots that follows a short montage sequence of women working. The words doctor, sculptor, philosophy professor, carpenter, cable splicer, and truck driver, not their names, appear under the images of the six characters as they talk about their jobs, why they chose them and how they cope with them. The interviews are intercut to emphasize similarities and differences in the women's experiences, positive and negative. Nine such sequences alternate with nine narrative sequences in which a friendship between the doctor and the truck driver develops.

Many feminist filmmakers use the documentary form. The idea is to have women speaking with their own voices and controlling their own images, being the subject rather than the object. Feminist documentaries often focus on more than one woman, to de-emphasize the "personal story" and show the political aspects of women's lives, where we have things in common. Thus the slogan, "The personal is

political." Without denying the uniqueness of individuals and the specificity of our lives, feminist documentaries try to draw connections between us and our sisters.

One of the first and most widely-used documentaries to come out of the second wave of the Women's Movement was Julia Reichert and Jim Klein's *GROWING UP FEMALE* (1971), which shows six women, ages 4 to 30, and ways they are conditioned to their social role. The film combines interviews with the women with scenes depicting their daily lives, at home and at school or work. It analyzes the conditions of our oppression in a consciousness-raising way, coming up with no answers but another question, "Now what?"

In the years since *GROWING UP FEMALE*, many women challenged their female-role conditioning. Some, like the women in *WHAT YOU TAKE FOR GRANTED*, took jobs that changed their public role. Feminist films such as *UNION MAIDS* and *ROSIE THE RIVETER* have re-discovered the history of women in the work force. Network TV and mass circulation newspapers and magazines are full of stories featuring women in "men's jobs." Usually these women say things like

- "I'm not a feminist; it's not necessary any more," or
- "I didn't have to burn my bra to get into medical school," or
- "The men give me credit for being as good as they are."

It would seem that all women have to worry about now is losing their femininity. The women in *WHAT YOU TAKE FOR GRANTED* tell a different story; their lives are not ideal, they have a new set of problems. Again, Citron comes up with no answers, just another "Now what?"

No film, not even a feminist documentary, offers a transparent representation of real people. No matter how real the people filmed are, the filmmaker creates a character when she makes a film. She chooses what to reveal about a person and how to reveal it. The filmmaker interprets the person for the audience. Citron's fictitious characters are well-defined and highly believable. Some viewers may not realize the characters are fictitious until the final credits make it explicit. The characters are composites created out of forty interviews Citron conducted with women in non-traditional jobs. Her six women cover a wider range of experience than six real women, no matter how carefully chosen. As one of the women interviewed, I was pleased to recognize my own contributions when I saw the film.

By using fictitious characters, Citron has made overt her control over the images that are presented to us. Furthermore, she controls the relationship between the two characters in the narrative scenes, Anna and Dianna. *GROWING UP FEMALE* begins and ends with portraits of a daughter and a mother in a nuclear family. In Citron's film, the nuclear family is out the window. Anna the truck driver and Dianna the doctor are both young single white women who live alone. Dianna is a lesbian; Anna is straight. As their relationship develops, their conversations center on their respective jobs, rather than family problems or love life.

By concentrating on the work-oriented part of the two women's lives and simplifying their home lives, Citron can show how the class difference between them is expressed in their relationship. This class difference is a simplified one, determined solely by the jobs the two women do. A more complete portrayal of the issue would take into account the influence of family and the fact that working class and professional women have different social groups and social institutions.

The film never explains how a doctor and a truck driver originally had a chance to meet. In the real world, such a meeting would not occur unless the two had some similar interest, such as the Women's Movement, to bring them together. They could have met at a Holly Near concert. But although Anna and Dianna, as well as the four other women in the film, often speak with a feminist perspective, none of them speaks of the Women's Movement or of their participation in any women's group. My impression is that WHAT YOU TAKE FOR GRANTED is geared to movement women, not obviously and perhaps not intentionally.

Throughout the film the documentary and narrative scenes alternate. Three, four, or all six characters are intercut within the nine documentary scenes. In each scene the characters give their own insights on related themes. We are led to make generalizations about the information they present, an interplay of personal and political.

The camerawork is simple, clean, and unobtrusive, without the abstract imagery characteristic of other Citron films, DAUGHTER RITE and PARTHENOGENESIS. The women are filmed in their homes, sitting on a sofa by a plant-filled window or standing in a kitchen doorway. The camera takes the fixed position of a listener, alternating between medium shots and close ups of their faces. The women face the camera and speak directly to it, thus to the audience. We can easily imagine ourselves in the place of the camera, sitting with these women in their homes and sharing their lives.

In the narrative scenes as well, the camera takes a fixed position and is restricted to zooms and pans, a documentary style. Anna the truck driver and Dianna the doctor ignore the camera and talk to each other. They are filmed in everyday settings — their homes, an alley, a park, a restaurant. Often they face each other from opposite sides of the frame, with a car, ironing board, or table between them. They are talking to each other across a separation.

Citron originally filmed many feet of women on the job, to be intercut with the "talking head" shots. But she decided not to use any of it, except short sequences at the beginning and end, because it fragmented the film. I think that fragmentation reflects the total separation of women's domestic space from "the world out there," including the job. Home is the only place where we can be ourselves, have some control. We do not define ourselves at work, but at home, on our own territory.

The characters do not cover the full range of possibilities of women in nontraditional jobs. There are no policewomen, soldiers, security

guards, engineers, computer analysts, business executives, or politicians. Perhaps such women would have a less critical attitude and be less ambivalent about the price they pay for the jobs they have. In fact, all the jobs represented are jobs popular with movement women. Citron's extensive research becomes evident in the documentary scenes, as the characters provide a lot of well-organized information, the result of her many hours of interviews.

The carpenter, cable splicer, and truck driver are working class. As the carpenter describes it, they do shit man's work for more pay than shit woman's work. They belong to unions, work outside, work erratic hours. Their jobs are physically demanding and not designed to allow for women's needs. They must prove themselves to their male coworkers, who are openly hostile to them. The cable splicer describes the breaking-in process for a new worker. She thought they were being hard on her because she was a woman, but it turned out that every new worker was treated the same way. When she gained skill at the job, instead of respecting her more, the men respected themselves less for doing a job a woman could do.

The sculptor, philosophy professor, and doctor are professional class. Their jobs have status and enable them to develop skills and creativity. Discrimination against them is subtler. The doctor describes women medical students being weeded out and not knowing exactly why. The philosophy professor says a woman has to be twice as good as the men, but not threaten them. The professionals must play a role, and their success depends on how well they learn the secret rules.

The carpenter and the philosophy professor are black; the other four women are white. While the black women share the same experiences as the white women, they must combat race as well as sex discrimination. The white women can afford not to speak of race. The carpenter tells of an older black man on one of her jobs, who said to her,

"My mother picked cotton. I know women are tough. You can do it."

The philosophy professor says she lives in three worlds: the worlds of women, black women, and white men.

The carpenter and sculptor are single mothers, the cable splicer is married and pregnant (her husband is unemployed), the doctor and truck driver are single and childless, the philosophy professor doesn't say. No husbands or children appear in the film, except for a picture of the carpenter's son in the background. These are women whose traditional roles have been turned upside down. They work with men and live without them. Men are competitors and women are allies.

Sexual harassment at the workplace, in the usual sense of sexual advances by superiors, is not addressed in this film. Harassment described by the women takes more direct and relentless forms — overt male hostility, dirty pictures, crude jokes. The truck driver and the

sculptor describe harassment as an obstacle and a challenge. The truck driver says that going into her "lock device" and hanging tough was good for her. The sculptor describes an incident when she successfully challenged a bully, who changed his behavior. The scenario of the angry woman's triumph over the sexist man produces one of the most positive, empowering moments of the film.

But that's not the whole story. The carpenter relates that to her male coworkers, she's either a good girl or a bad girl, and everything that goes with it. She chooses to be a good girl. When they harass her with pornography, she is angry but afraid to show it. The doctor tells about showing anger when her male co-workers joke about child rape victims, only to be criticized herself for unprofessional behavior. The philosophy professor talks about "fogging," a way of suddenly not being there, to avoid dealing with male power structures, getting angry, taking risks. Dealing with male harassment is not such a simple matter.

As the narrative progresses, a tentative friendship develops between Anna and Dianna. Their class differences create a distance between them, and the stresses each undergoes at work affect their relationship as well. They seek out ways to bridge the distance between them, and find they can give each other support as outsiders in a man's world.

Anna the truck driver is feisty, outgoing, and open. She wears a leather jacket, plays the clarinet, drinks tequila and recites Cervantes. She has back problems and insomnia from working double shifts. A narrative scene shows her coming home from work. The camera slowly pans around her living room as she comes through the door, turns on a lamp, gets a beer from the refrigerator, sits down on the sofa, lights a cigarette, drinks her beer, plays her clarinet uninterrupted. She has a lot of books for a working class woman. This shot occurs as a parenthesis within a documentary scene of Anna enumerating the negative (stress of being on call and working overtime), then the positive (working outside, feeling independent, making good money) aspects of her job. Thus Anna is portrayed as a complex person who has problems but is basically comfortable with herself.

Dianna the doctor is quiet and reserved. She spends her spare time doing her housework and answering the telephone. In her scene alone, she is mopping her kitchen floor when her father phones. He is also a doctor and doesn't approve of the hospital where she has chosen to work. She is framed by the doorway as she talks and listens, trying to justify herself to him. This shot occurs as a parenthesis within a documentary scene of Dianna telling how at first she acted like a nurse, smiling at patients, trying to make them comfortable. Then she learned to be a doctor, not to smile, to keep her distance. She says, "You don't want to have to do it that way." Dianna appears to be hemmed in by the restrictions imposed on her by her father and her (his) career. She is tense and repressed.

In another revealing scene, Anna and Dianna run together in the park. As they do warm ups, start to run, then sit down to rest, they are equals

in body. But Anna constantly refers to Dianna's being a doctor, with their secret knowledge and strange ways. As for Dianna, her efforts to be acceptable to the medical profession have resulted in the repression of her emotional side. She evades Anna's questions about her love life and finally just refuses to answer them. Anna reacts by apologizing and criticizing her own behavior, "my big mouth." She assumes that she, as the social inferior, is at fault.

As a result of Dianna's reticence, the issue of sexuality is played down. The fact that Dianna is gay and Anna is straight makes their relationship ambivalent and undefined. If both were with men, they'd be with the men or talking about them. If both were gay, we would expect them to fall in love. As it is, sexuality is one more part of their lives they do not share with each other.

WHAT YOU TAKE FOR GRANTED is an important feminist film on the levels of both form and content. Its unusual location on the continuum between narrative and documentary leads the viewer to contemplate the film as fact and fiction, representation and construction. No men appear in the film; the crew are all women also; throughout the film, the concerns are consistently woman-identified. Citron has designed her film so that many women can recognize themselves and their lives in it: professional and blue collar, lesbian and straight, mothers and non-mothers, married and single, black and white. This recognition aspect makes the film valuable to its women viewers and offsets the undercurrent of discouragement at all the difficulties faced by token women.

Women who work surrounded by men are denied membership as equals; in their isolation and alienation they fall back on individual solutions. The union members in the film think of the union as benefits and work rules rather than as an organization they belong to. All the characters seem to live independent, self-contained lives. The stodgy old demand to "show women organizing to change their lives" may be raised here. On the one hand, Citron insists on creating a realistic picture, not an idealistic one. On the other hand, the carpenters she interviewed for her research are members of Women in the Trades, a support group of women who also go to demonstrations together. Perhaps a reference to such a group could have helped to emphasize the isolation, rather than provoke excessive optimism.

Women need to talk to each other and support each other, particularly when we are struggling to challenge repressive institutions. We must confront our differences and the ways we reflect the power of those institutions, as well as our common interests. We need more films like Michelle Citron's WHAT YOU TAKE FOR GRANTED, which address these issues honestly and thoughtfully.

Lie Back and Enjoy It Movies with women in them

by Claudia Gorbman

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JoAnn Elam's *LIE BACK AND ENJOY IT* is an absorbing eight-minute dialectical film about the politics of representation. More specifically, it examines the politics of filmic representation of women under patriarchy. Its image track consists of technologically manipulated images of women, and some printed titles. Its soundtrack consists of a dialogue between a Man (a filmmaker) and a Woman (of whom he's going to make a film).

Elam's earlier film *RAPE* (1975) similarly put together a number of kinds of filmic material: video-transfer, cinema-verite footage, studio-shot footage, handwritten title cards, and on the soundtrack, a conversation among the women who are shown in the video portions. In opposition to a cinema based on illusion, *RAPE* not only acknowledges but stresses the heterogeneity of filmic discourse. *LIE BACK*'s formal strategy emphasizes diverse kinds of film discourse even further. It sets up a radical disjunction between soundtrack and image, such that we can connect up sound and image only by intellectual work, rather than by fantasy dependent on illusion.

On the image track we see close ups of a woman, and a few almost unintelligible additional shots, all presumably from a pornographic movie. This small inventory of shots is progressively more deformed and distorted. Elam does this by looping, flicker effects, reversing the image (L-R), including sprocket holes and frame lines, running the frames by in a blur (as if the film is slipping in the gate), high-contrast reprinting, superimpositions, and underexposure. All these devices render the image more and more difficult to read, and subsequently point up the image's materiality — its status as strips of printed celluloid which run through machines. The point here is that woman's image in commercial film — no matter, or because of, how much we psychically invest in it — is just that: an investment, a product, and a commodity which functions in a certain economy. Especially by using pornography footage, *LIE BACK* makes these connections most unequivocally: woman's body, on

the screen, is something desired, reified, invaded, and paid for. Thus the Woman's voice in the film says, "... there's no way you can use [sic] a woman without making her into an object and invading her space."

The image track also includes occasional titles. The first three, for example, are interspersed like Burma-Shave signs along an unsettling filmic scenery. These read:

YOU
DO
SOMETHING TO ME

This kind of wordplay, which Elam had already employed in *RAPE*, makes thought-provoking links between patriarchal sexuality, popular culture and language, and the power relation that exists between the artist and his model.

The soundtrack consists of a dialogue between a man's voice and a woman's voice (let's call them M and W). For those hooked on the pleasure of conventional voyeuristic narrative, this soundtrack seemingly establishes a fictional (diegetic) space, and "characters"; it holds out the promise of rewards of "eavesdropperism." As we listen, N and W are sitting in their kitchen. He's a filmmaker and is planning to shoot a "personal" film about her and about their relationship. She has her doubts about the project. Increasingly, though, and almost seamlessly, their conversation passes from a believably *fictional* (*diegetic*) mode to a *critical* one. First slippage: W refers to the tape recorder. (Why, if they're discussing a film he's going to make, is a tape recorder running in their kitchen?) A character thus acknowledges the discourse, the fact of the recording — it's a "mistake" which no self-effacing conventional narrative film would make. Soon after, W asks M, "You think the fact that this is a man's voice and a woman's voice has anything to do with how people are going to relate to it?" The soundtrack makes it difficult to believe in the initial narrative premise any more. Toward the end, their discussion turns on M's claim that in making his movie he'll merely be filming "what's really going on" rather than directing the material's shape in accord with his fantasies. W socratically talks N into a logical corner; M then chuckles, "Uh oh, I think you've got me on this one" We've moved, from two characters — an ideologically innocent filmmaker and a recalcitrant protagonist-to-be — to two film theorists enjoying the interplay of their debating positions. In fact, the film ends when N refers to it (not the film he was going to make, but the one he's in).

The discussion, then, proceeds dialectically. Each voice represents a position. M describes himself as an artist. At first, at least, he claims a sort of innocent neutrality regarding the politics of representation. His art will get at "the truth" via his vision.

I'm just making a film about us. I mean, what does all this culture stuff have to do with that? I mean, that's why I'm making personal films.

Art is subjective expression; it transcends history, politics, culture. But for W, all representations are products of their culture ("in this century," patriarchal culture) and they necessarily are determined by it. Furthermore representation itself is a political issue. A power relationship exists between the person behind the camera and the person being filmed, and anyone denying or ignoring this fact is irresponsible.

The force of Elam's visuals, and W's persuasive arguments in the face of M's innocence, make it abundantly evident that Elam aligns herself with W's position. But at the same time the film works to caution against any hasty dismissal of M. First of all, he sounds like a pretty nice guy. Second, he represents the dominant canon of artistic creation in the modern western world. It's one which most of us have inherited:

I'm an artist. I'm trying to find out the truth about things. to make (films) that will make people feel better and learn something of the world and give them more control over things, and I'm trying to enlarge people's experience with my film's.

It's hard to deny the compelling quality, the "rightness" of his statements, even when the twentieth century has so conclusively vetoed the possibility of such a thing as "the truth." As for W, our sympathies waver when her radicalism carries her to the point of rejecting any attempts to work with the problems of representation in our culture:

I wish that these male filmmakers would stop, you know, putting all these women in their films. I wish that they would just give up ... you should have no *women* in your films.

Finally, when W utters her last words, a strident "I'm right and you're wrong," we feel that Elam has set these characters up to receive equal consideration. Each has virtues and faults. What M lacks in intellectual sophistication, he makes up for in personal charm. W's ideological consciousness-raising is crucial, but her irritably-made challenges threaten to obliterate human interaction from among the possibilities of progressive art. The spectator/auditor having confronted LIE BACK AND ENJOY IT is not left to "lie back" but precisely to judge the positions which the voices have argued.

If you set up a dialectical situation in order to lead people to consider the possible synthesis of ideas presented, ultimately, you have a didactic purpose. Where does Elam's film lead us? An undergraduate male student paid it a true compliment in declaring that he can no longer look at a woman in a film without thinking about the consequences of the filmmaker's use of her as a person and as a spectacle. LIE BACK encourages analysis, all the more so since its own structure moves from positioning the spectator in a (minimally) voyeuristic stance 71 to a maximally critical one. The film is endowed with remarkable structural and rhetorical lucidity. Everyone who watches movies with women in them ought to see it.

Women's cinema in Germany

by Claudia Lennsen

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German film women

— the editors

This is the second group of articles on German women and film we are pleased to present in JUMP CUT. In JUMP CUT No. 27, a special section on women and film in Germany, generated by Marc Silberman, had articles on the following topics: an overview of German women's cinema, a comparison of the German and U.S. feminist movements, interviews with Helga Reidemeister, Jutta Brückner, and Christina Perincioli, articles from the German feminist film periodical *frauen und film* in translation by filmmakers Helke Sander and Helga Reidemeister, and a theoretical essay by Gertrud Koch on why women go to the movies.

We continue in this issue with a further overview of German women's cinema and interviews with filmmakers. Since these women's films are just beginning to be introduced into the United States, we have here in-depth reviews of two of the films in U.S. distribution: *THE ALL-AROUND REDUCED PERSONALITY* and *MARIANNE AND JULIANE*. Hopefully more will be available to be seen soon. We would welcome more articles on individual films and on women's film culture in Germany. This section, like the one in issue No. 27, was generated by Marc Silberman.

Women's cinema in Germany

— Claudia Lennsen

In the summer of 1980 a U.S. woman journalist asked people with a knowledge of the subject: "Is it true that German film production is monopolized by women filmmakers? A fanciful rumor: The women present — filmmakers, critics, producers and distribution people —

merely replied with an ironical sigh, "How wonderful it would be."

The films described here represent a small extract from film production by women around 1980. It nevertheless provides an outline of the material and forms of expression with which they are currently concerned in this country. ETWAS TUT WEH (SOMETHING HURTS) by Recha Jungmann, HUNGERJAHRE (YEARS OF HUNGER) by Jutta Brückner and VON WEGEN "SCHICKSAL" (THIS IS "DESTINY"?) by Helga Reidemeister, for example, despite their differences of form and content as impressionistic essay-film, feature and documentary film, all portray the "private realm as something political" and thus take up a theme of particular interest to the feminist movement. (See interview with Reidemeister in JUMP CUT, 27).

Both HUNGERJAHRE and VON WEGEN "SCHICKSAL" deal, in quite different ways, with mother-daughter conflicts and thus offer film commentaries upon a public discussion. (See interview with Brückner in this issue.) These two films, together with ETWAS TUT WEH, in addition use a subjective or autobiographical access to the objects of their attention. WAS SOLL'N WIR DENN MACHEN OHNE DEN TOD (WHAT SHALL WE DO WITHOUT DEATH?) by Elfi Mikesch describes the world of elderly women using an experimental hybrid form that rejects the conventional division between documentary film and fiction, in order to give special expression to a particular fantasy world.

LETZTE LIEBE (LAST LOVE) by Ingemo Engstrom finally is one of the most interesting feature films of recent times, on account of the way it differentiates itself from conventional narrative film through its consistent stylization and adherence to interweaving several thematic layers about the relationship between love and death. One of these themes is the search for trails and traces of the past, an emotional debate with one's own history in the context of contemporary (Germany) history.

This interest in women's life histories as part of an overall history of the time (with the intention of portraying the story of women hitherto dismissed from the pages of history as traditionally handed down to us) crops up in a number of new films by German women filmmakers. In 1980, for example, Helma Sanders-Brahms presented her autobiographical film, DEUTSCHLAND, BLEICHE MUTTER (GERMANY, PALE MOTHER), which deals with the relationship of the authoress and her mother during the Second World War. Claudia Alemann has released a film about the early French woman socialist and feminist, FLORA TRISTAN, who lived in the 19th century. Angela Summereder has reconstructed an authentic trial that took place in Austria in 1949, in which a woman is sentenced to death for poisoning her husband; she is reprieved, only to lead the life of an outsider. Angela Summereder draws a picture of Fascism after Fascism. Helke Sander, in her new film, DER SUBJECTIVE FAKTOR (THE SUBJECTIVE FACTOR) returns to the period when the New Feminist Movement in Germany originated. She tells the story of a politically dedicated woman

at the time of the student revolt in Berlin in 1968. (See interview with Sander in this issue.) Two other films. *1 + 1 = 3* by Heide Genée and *MENSCHENFRAUEN* (WOMEN-PEOPLE) by Valie Export, link the classical fable of emancipation (woman leaves man with whom she has been living — a situation that has increasingly interested male filmmakers) with a story about the ostensibly happy alternative; i.e., bearing a child and bringing it up alone or together with other women. These films met with a great deal of criticism from the feminist movement on account of their one-sidedness and all too harmonious argumentation. On the other hand, *1 + 1 = 3*, laid out in the form of a comedy, was one of the most successful films of the New German Cinema in 1980.

A film that is also set in the present and is concerned with the psychological relationship between two sisters is a film by Margarethe von Trotta, *SCHWESTERN* (SISTERS). It deals with the relationship between dependence and repression.

Most of the new films by women are however more interested in reconciling the "inner world" of women with external reality. This applies, for example, to Edna Politi's *WIE DAS MEER UND SEINE WOGEN* (LIKE THE SEA AND ITS WAVES), which shows how the struggle between Israel and the Palestinians moulds the friendship between two women of different nationalities; or Jutta Brückner's new film, *LAUFENLERNEN* (LEARNING TO WALK) which is concerned with the psychological effects of television on a woman.

There is a whole series of socially committed realistic films about the situation of young people, e.g. by Marianne Lüdcke, Ilse Hoffmann and Petra Haffter — and, at the opposite end of the spectrum of artistic ambition, the almost surrealistically stylized art film, such as Ulrike Ottinger's *BILDNIS EINER TRINKERIN* (PORTRAIT OF A DRINKER), which is concerned with pictures of Berlin and a staging of persistent female alcoholism. (See interview with Ottinger in this issue.) Ulrike Ottinger's next project has to do with the freaks of European art and cultural history and will be called *FREAK ORLANDO*. Helga Reidemeister is planning to film a portrait of a photographic model, *MIT STARREM BLICK AUF'S GELD* (WITH GAZE FIXED ON MONEY), and Elfi Mikesch is working on a film about a group of mysterious people in a mysterious hotel in Vienna.

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Many of them joined together in a *Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen* (Association of Women Filmmakers) in 1979 and demanded

"50% of all monies put up for films, production units and documentary projects; 50% of all jobs and training opportunities; 50% representation on all committees, and more support for screening facilities and the distribution of films by women."

These demands for parity, for equal representation on all commissions that provide financial support for film production and distribution appeared so extravagant that they elicited smug, self-satisfied remarks in many cultural-political commentaries.

The women's situation is confused, but not hopeless. Their own self-confidence has grown, as has that of German filmmakers in general, since the interest of the public for their cinema began to grow again and German films begin to gain recognition abroad. This development, of course, also results from various film promotion systems in Germany, which over the last few years have been expanded to form a network: (1) Tax revenue is distributed at a regional and national level. (2) Monies are put aside by the television authorities out of license fees. (3) Sums derived from a statutory levy of DM 0,15 on each cinema ticket sold are allocated for film projects. Within this complicated system, quite disparate intentions are at work, sometimes in harmony with each other and sometimes in opposition. The commissions appointed by state authorities act as patrons of the arts. The largest film producers and distributors provide a permanent demand and a market that is never congested.

This system, which is unique in comparison to those in other countries with a similar film tradition and an ailing film industry, is attributable to the political strategies and commitment of filmmakers over the past 15 years. But whenever male German filmmakers discuss their work, they speak in terms of the filmmakers, i.e. of themselves. Only when the women have registered their protest, do they condescendingly admit to having meant women as well.

Seven years ago, in the first issue of the magazine *Frauen und Film*, Helke Sander (who founded the publication as a forum for feminist film work) was able to maintain polemically that the comprehensive discrimination against women filmmakers amounted to a prohibition on the exercise of their profession (*Berufsverbot*). As recently as four years ago, male representatives of various film promotional commissions asserted in a series of interviews in *Frauen und Film* that projects by women could not be supported, because to all intents and purposes none existed.

However, women film critics and historians had already begun long before, in close collaboration with women filmmakers at home and abroad, to collect projects that had initially not been accepted by television authorities or film promotion boards. They wrote about the "little" films by women, the cheap, inconspicuous feature, documentary and experimental films that were tucked away in late night programs on television. And they investigated as a problem, the extent to which the

"impoverished aesthetic" and lack of circulation was a conscious sub-cultural phenomenon, and the extent to which it merely resulted from official discrimination.

Training problems, poorer opportunities to get a start, and producers' lack of confidence in women directors, camerawomen, etc. — these were some of the reasons for women's being kept out of a film career, not a deliberate renunciation of such a career. These women filmmakers were born around the year 1940 and were for a ridiculously long time labeled "the up and coming generation."

Over the last five years, a number of things has happened. National film festivals have successfully shown women's films. Their innovations in aesthetics and content have been discussed by the media. New magazines founded by women have expanded the spectrum of public discussion. Establishment male film criticism was no longer able to ignore women's work, at least not with quite so much self-assuredness and complacency. This interest shown by male critics, however, has a reverse face. They are incredibly quick to *define* something as feminist, whereas women filmmakers would prefer to do without such rigid attributions.

An editorial in *frauen und film* discussed this contradiction.

"Two or three years ago we wrote against an establishment of film critics that hardly took any notice of films by women or that made malicious comments about them. Today, these same critics sometimes benevolently take films under their wing as 'feminist films' that bore us to death or annoy us. What has happened?"

Over the past five years the number of films produced in the Federal Republic of Germany and Berlin rose, and with it rose the proportion of films made by women. For two years now there has been a noticeable intake of female students into the film schools (at the German Academy for Film and Television in Berlin there are more than 50%). Thus, over the next few years even more projects by women are to be expected. But the work conditions for women filmmakers have not changed to any great extent.

Collective, non-hierarchical forms of production are still best suited to small projects. The logical conclusion drawn from this however should not be that "women's films" are "low budget films." For women who learn to say "I," to gain acceptance of their own artistic ideas, they will struggle to obtain the necessary means of realizing them. It is still as revolutionary as it has always been in a large-scale film production, whose organization is based on the division of labor, for a woman to find acceptance and respect for her own individual creativity and to have her instructions carried out.

Most women filmmakers work as their own authors and directors (i.e., they are responsible for the screenplay and direction and attempt to

articulate a maximum of personal expression in a film). That also means, however, that they have to convince people with their personal prestige in order to find backers. Like their male counterparts' work, their films are mostly produced within the framework of a cooperation between various national and regional support boards and a television authority.

Just at the moment when women are on the point of achieving a place for themselves within this production system, more and more criticism is being directed at the system — and frequently the stories of rejected, failed projects by women provide the most convincing material. Manfred Delling, for example, wrote in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (July 1980):

"Those were the days, when producers decided whether a film would be produced or not. Nowadays they are little more than the organizational executors of commissions set up by the state, or the various federal states, the Institute for Film Production (*Filmforderungs-anstalt*) and/or the television authorities, who decide what they may produce ... Thus the state of German cinema, in particular the New German Cinema, has for many years now not been shaped purely by the ideas of those who write, produce and direct films (as the state of literature is dependent solely on the spirit of its authors and publishers). No, it is controlled by the middlemen who sit on the money. Since, however, the most striking characteristic of commissions has always been timidity rather than courage, the entire support system is at the same time a preventive system."

Projects by women that do not conform to the established public opinion of what are "women's subjects" face difficulties. On the other hand, women's projects that attempt "yet again" to deal with a subject that has already come up in a similar form also have little chance. Under these circumstances it is impossible to extract from the women's films a catalogue of norms relating to a specific female aesthetic. The social contradictions specific to sex are, however, reflected in these films in film-aesthetic forms. A woman distributor justified this productive chaos by remarking that there was not merely one sort of women's film and that women did not want anything in particular. In truth they have wanted everything, and therefore, quite different things.

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This is a reprint of the introduction to a program booklet accompanying a package of German women's films touring the United States. It was published by the Goethe Institute, Munich, 1980.

frauen und film

translated by Marc Silberman

The German feminist film journal *frauen und film* has been of singular importance in establishing a women's film culture in Germany. It not only has published criticism; it has been the meeting place for women who would become future directors and the locus of organizing for a women's film union and for women's distribution and exhibition.

Following are excerpts from *frauen und film* editorials which give an indication of the journal's direction and concerns.

From the Introduction to the reprint of *frauen und film*, 1-5, 1975:

We want to address women as spectators constantly confronted with filmic images and themes. The dominant culture may not have produced these images and themes, but it reproduces and reinforces them. *frauen und film* should give women the courage to withdraw from this brainwashing and to acknowledge their own experiences. This is also true for women who work directly in the media.

From the Editorial, *frauen und film*, 6 (Fall 1975):

The forms of protest appearing within the women's movement develop spontaneously in every women's group and constitute one of its essential strengths. These forms of protest establish a non-verbal, aesthetic and emotional bond between otherwise unacquainted groups. When such groups do not consider themselves responsible to a male organization, they do not have to assimilate male patterns of interaction ... The women's methods include ridiculing traditional rituals and rejecting them as a norm, so as to reveal those rituals' limited validity and oppressiveness. The women's community solidarity confronts the male phalanx ... How do these various forms of protest express themselves on film? In content and in form? Which stands to gain public acceptance; i.e., get supported with public monies from television and film commissions? ... How can the filmmaker acknowledge and represent the process of cultural revolution? ... How can such protest succeed in a medium where men read and accept scripts and evaluate films? How can we succeed against the reasoning of friendly reactionary people who want to make the women's movement look foolish?

From the Editorial, *frauen und film*, 7 (May 1976). [*frauen und film* responded to feminist criticism as the magazine was published with the left company Rotbuch, which has men on its editorial board.]:

We want to assist women's interests in an area in which we understand something. We will accomplish this task together with others also seeking to analyze social conflicts, people unafraid of publicizing and tolerating all our problems and inconsistencies. The Rotbuch Collective has indicated this by accepting us into their publishing program.

We still are vehement apostles of the thesis that women alone in women's groups should formulate their experiences and develop their strategies. But to accomplish our strategies we cannot gloss over or retreat from reality. If we women know what we want, we must convince as many as possible to want the same.

Since this journal intends to deal with issues of the public sphere, it cannot pull a veil over the contradictions within the feminist sphere so that the non-feminist public won't notice them. To emancipate ourselves we must develop alternate organizational structures — not keep secrets but rather must unmask all questions, problems, aggressions, and even complacency.

From the Editorial, *frauen und film*, 21 (September 1979):

Four years ago *frauen und film* waged a critical offensive against sexism, coupled with a struggle for an independent, oppositional feminist culture.

This program seemingly nourished hope for better films and a feminist film culture. But we have tripped over a big stone lying in the way of this illusion — the absence of women's autonomous film production. All our issues constantly examine and describe this absence.

We've looked for a denied women's culture within film history, but it's proved to be more than a permanent search — even if we can acknowledge and describe the works of Dulac, Deren, Arzner, Lupino, Leontine Sagan, etc. as coherent elements. For those few women's films within film history correspond to male dominated culture. Film women do not inhabit a realm of oppositional culture produced by competing, rather women's film culture has been corrupted and robbed of its potentially radical otherness.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Power of Men Is the Patience of Women "Fight first ... before making beautiful art"

by Gretchen Elsner-Sommer

from *Jump Cut*, no. 29, February 1984, p. 51

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THE POWER OF MEN IS THE PATIENCE OF WOMEN, directed by German feminist filmmaker Christina Perincioli, relates the story of a street market vendor, Addi, who for years has been mentally and physically abused by her husband. Addi has tried to take her child and leave, but she has felt powerless in a culture which considers violence in marriage a private affair. After one particularly brutal beating, she seeks refuge with friends. As she experiences the exhilaration of independence, she also faces social brutality. Addi seeks help from lawyers, health organizations and social agencies, but they all fail her. Without a job and without an apartment, Addi has to return to her husband.

One day Addi hears a television program about a women's shelter. She immediately takes her son and goes there to live. In the women's shelter she gets support and encouragement. In a collective way, the women there guide each other through the insensitive institutions they must pass to gain legal marital separation. Later Addi, two other women from the shelter, and their children move into their own apartment and live collectively.

The film conveys a message of strength and possibilities. Although it shows battered wives' despair, paralyzing terror, and isolation, finally the film shows an alternative. In the women's shelter, women join together — sharing fears, pooling resources, gaining strength and security, and finding collective solutions to their domestic situations.

The film's first shot sets up a hopeful tone. The camera glides slowly among three women vendors in an open market place. The women are talking and laughing together as they pass garments between them. Although the audience doesn't know the reason for their laughter, it is plain to see that friendship exists between the women. They have made themselves a niche in this public place. The visual style strengthens our

sense of their personal bond. The sequence is shot in two long, uninterrupted shots, which give an impression of the three women's togetherness as well as a sense of movement and vitality.

Following this, we see a woman's hand, writing in longhand the film title and credits. We hear a woman's voice explaining the film's origin. This voice returns frequently in the film to give the audience information. It reminds the audience that it is the women themselves telling their story. The handwritten credits visually express the closeness between battered women's actual experience and the very making of the film. For example, films usually only show a woman's hand writing diaries or grocery lists or other personal documents. Titles usually get presented in technically brilliant manipulations of cameras and lighting (such as in the awesome title sequence in *STAR WARS*). To mix these two filmic styles, to let a woman's hand announce a complete film, conveys a whole new sense of power and possibility invested in those hands. Furthermore, this feminist visual tactic also gives a greater recognition to women's hands writing diaries and grocery lists.

The hopeful tone disappears quickly in the brutal shots which follow, and that initial hope gets re-echoed midway only briefly in another long shot. Then the only long tracking shot in the film follows Addi on a long bicycle ride after she has just left her husband. The free camera reflects Addi's spirit as she attempts to make her first real break from her husband. Almost immediately after that long flowing shot, the hopeful tone is ruptured, as Addi, unable to find work, must return to her husband.

Finally, Addi makes a definitive break from her husband and goes to live at the women's shelter. Here the camera is again light as it delineates the women's living quarters. This space is small and confining, but the women share it easily, giving support to each other while reorganizing their lives. In depicting a typical day at the shelter, the camera moves among several women, letting us see how they interact. One woman shows pictures of her home and describes how she decorated it. Another woman cuts and sets a friend's hair, assuring the friend that she will feel much better with a new hairdo. Another woman talks to Addi about how to get food and aid from government agencies. As all these conversations take place in the same room, some women join in more than one conversation at a time, and some sit quiet, listening. The women share a unity as they share the same space. The same fears and courage brought them all here to live.

The last two scenes push into the future the sense of possibility and strength that the initial scenes visualized. We now see Addi and the two women she lives with in their own apartment drinking coffee. One of the women is being threatened by her ex-husband. Together, they decide the best way to protect themselves and their children from his taunts. The camera glides gently among them, as it did in the market place, recording in long takes their conversation and their closeness. The next sequence is of a woman's hand writing the final credits for the film. The

women's conversation continues over the titles as they talk about what they plan to do after the making of this film. They all have plans and are no longer talking about their pasts, as they did for the making of this film. For the sharing of their fears and the naming of their power has exorcised the fear. They are free now, as the hand signifies, to write their own futures.

The women we see at the end of the film are the same women we saw at the market place. We recognize them now in depth, as we could not before. We also understand the reasons for their laughter. These women have shed a burden of violence, guilt and solitude. By leaving their "traditional" marriage, homes and husbands, they have collectively found new strength in themselves that has enabled them to create new lives and to survive.

The scenes of hope and potential described above are interrupted throughout the film by scenes which depict the burden and constriction of Addi's life with her husband. In these scenes, the camera does not move at all. It lays a heavy gaze on the space it films. The camera's heaviness and immutability echo Addi's spirit. There seem no possibilities, nowhere to move to, no way for her to escape the guilt and violence that have become part of her life. The immutable camera describes Addi's seemingly immutable life.

This confined and weighty tone can be seen in the long shot of Addi and her friend Ulli in Addi's kitchen. Ulli knows that Addi has a miserable life with Max. Yet an unspoken socially imposed law between these friends demands that they not discuss the problem. Ulli comes to visit and brings Addi flowers. As they stand together in the kitchen, the camera is fixed in a distant framing which allows them both to be seen at the same time. Ulli arranges flowers; Addi clears away the dinner dishes. After they finish, they stand facing each other. For the entire sequence, the friends do not speak. A woman's voice over describes the agreement between these two women to avoid talking about the violence in Addi's life. The unmoving

When Addi first leaves her husband, she goes to her friend Ulli's house. We see a static long shot of Ulli and her husband in bed discussing how uncomfortable it is for everyone to have to have Addi living with them. Immediately following this shot, we see Addi, pensive and uncomfortable, sitting on a low chair smoking a cigarette. The camera does not move, but focuses down on Addi in a very confined space. As ashes from her cigarette fall to the floor, Addi bends immediately to pick them up, not wanting to heighten the inconvenience she is causing her friends by being sloppy. The static camera in both of these shots contrasts dramatically with the tracking shot following Addi on her bicycle, which introduced her stay with these friends.

Again, in the hospital after her husband has beaten Addi, the camera focuses in a long take down on the hospital corridor, busy with the lights and noise of an emergency room. Nurses and doctors hustle in every direction, but none comes to Addi's aid. Addi is lying on a stretcher off

to the side of the frame. Her husband sits next to her with his head bowed repentantly. The camera, like everyone else in the room, stays distanced from Addi's distress. Just like society in general, the camera does not move in close to help her or examine her wounds. Rather, Addi remains alone, with her repentant but brutal husband, pushed off to the side. Her wounds are made known to the audience only through the cold words of a doctor's report in a voice over.

Christina Perincioli was very much involved with the three women who told their story in this film and also with the thousands of women whose story this film represents. In 1974, Perincioli visited women's shelters in England, where she became very interested in the subject of battered wives. As she began thinking and talking to other women about it, she was amazed to assess the degree of violence in women's lives. When she returned to Germany, she began working with other women to publicize the subject. Her interviews became part of a book entitled *Marriage and Violence*, published in 1975. Because of these women's collective actions, the first women's shelter was opened in Berlin in 1976.

As a filmmaker, Perincioli hardly stands at a distance from her work. Rather, she is intimately involved with it. She still continues to involve the women who made *THE POWER OF MEN IS THE PATIENCE OF WOMEN* in the ongoing process of the film's presentation. The film is always shown with a discussion afterwards. If Perincioli herself cannot attend, she often suggests that one of the women in the film accompany the film. They can always use the lecture fee, and in a sense they know as much about the film as Perincioli does.

In this film, Perincioli has used a narrative form to get her message across. She spices this form with the realism of interviews and the popular melodramatic theme of a woman's struggling to keep herself and her family together. With such a mixture of traditional, popular storytelling techniques, she can hold an audience's attention and lead them to accept Addi's radical solution to her problem. By the end of the film, Perincioli has described a unique physical and emotional space that women can occupy-both the battered women who are the subject of the film and women's filmmaking itself. It is a space which is outside and beyond the private sphere of the home, which has traditionally been woman's sole domain.

In "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film," Julia Lesage finds the politicized description of domestic space emblematic of the feminist documentaries of the seventies. Lesage shows, how a close and intimate collaboration between woman filmmaker and woman subject has led to a new representation of women in film. Such film images are necessary for women to see and relate to, to find power and possibility in, as they strive to move out of the private, domestic sphere and take up a place in the public world. Through her close collaboration with the subjects of her film, Christina Perincioli has created a film which is vibrant in its presentation of new images and possibilities for women.

Women's cinema in Germany

by Claudia Lennsen

from *Jump Cut*, no. 29, February 1984, pp. 49-50

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German film women

— the editors

This is the second group of articles on German women and film we are pleased to present in JUMP CUT. In JUMP CUT No. 27, a special section on women and film in Germany, generated by Marc Silberman, had articles on the following topics: an overview of German women's cinema, a comparison of the German and U.S. feminist movements, interviews with Helga Reidemeister, Jutta Brückner, and Christina Perincioli, articles from the German feminist film periodical *frauen und film* in translation by filmmakers Helke Sander and Helga Reidemeister, and a theoretical essay by Gertrud Koch on why women go to the movies.

We continue in this issue with a further overview of German women's cinema and interviews with filmmakers. Since these women's films are just beginning to be introduced into the United States, we have here in-depth reviews of two of the films in U.S. distribution: *THE ALL-AROUND REDUCED PERSONALITY* and *MARIANNE AND JULIANE*. Hopefully more will be available to be seen soon. We would welcome more articles on individual films and on women's film culture in Germany. This section, like the one in issue No. 27, was generated by Marc Silberman.

Women's cinema in Germany

— Claudia Lennsen

In the summer of 1980 a U.S. woman journalist asked people with a knowledge of the subject: "Is it true that German film production is monopolized by women filmmakers? A fanciful rumor: The women present — filmmakers, critics, producers and distribution people —

merely replied with an ironical sigh, "How wonderful it would be."

The films described here represent a small extract from film production by women around 1980. It nevertheless provides an outline of the material and forms of expression with which they are currently concerned in this country. ETWAS TUT WEH (SOMETHING HURTS) by Recha Jungmann, HUNGERJAHRE (YEARS OF HUNGER) by Jutta Brückner and VON WEGEN "SCHICKSAL" (THIS IS "DESTINY"?) by Helga Reidemeister, for example, despite their differences of form and content as impressionistic essay-film, feature and documentary film, all portray the "private realm as something political" and thus take up a theme of particular interest to the feminist movement. (See interview with Reidemeister in JUMP CUT, 27).

Both HUNGERJAHRE and VON WEGEN "SCHICKSAL" deal, in quite different ways, with mother-daughter conflicts and thus offer film commentaries upon a public discussion. (See interview with Brückner in this issue.) These two films, together with ETWAS TUT WEH, in addition use a subjective or autobiographical access to the objects of their attention. WAS SOLL'N WIR DENN MACHEN OHNE DEN TOD (WHAT SHALL WE DO WITHOUT DEATH?) by Elfi Mikesch describes the world of elderly women using an experimental hybrid form that rejects the conventional division between documentary film and fiction, in order to give special expression to a particular fantasy world.

LETZTE LIEBE (LAST LOVE) by Ingemo Engstrom finally is one of the most interesting feature films of recent times, on account of the way it differentiates itself from conventional narrative film through its consistent stylization and adherence to interweaving several thematic layers about the relationship between love and death. One of these themes is the search for trails and traces of the past, an emotional debate with one's own history in the context of contemporary (Germany) history.

This interest in women's life histories as part of an overall history of the time (with the intention of portraying the story of women hitherto dismissed from the pages of history as traditionally handed down to us) crops up in a number of new films by German women filmmakers. In 1980, for example, Helma Sanders-Brahms presented her autobiographical film, DEUTSCHLAND, BLEICHE MUTTER (GERMANY, PALE MOTHER), which deals with the relationship of the authoress and her mother during the Second World War. Claudia Alemann has released a film about the early French woman socialist and feminist, FLORA TRISTAN, who lived in the 19th century. Angela Summereder has reconstructed an authentic trial that took place in Austria in 1949, in which a woman is sentenced to death for poisoning her husband; she is reprieved, only to lead the life of an outsider. Angela Summereder draws a picture of Fascism after Fascism. Helke Sander, in her new film, DER SUBJECTIVE FAKTOR (THE SUBJECTIVE FACTOR) returns to the period when the New Feminist Movement in Germany originated. She tells the story of a politically dedicated woman

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"50% of all monies put up for films, production units and documentary projects; 50% of all jobs and training opportunities; 50% representation on all committees, and more support for screening facilities and the distribution of films by women."

These demands for parity, for equal representation on all commissions that provide financial support for film production and distribution appeared so extravagant that they elicited smug, self-satisfied remarks in many cultural-political commentaries.

The women's situation is confused, but not hopeless. Their own self-confidence has grown, as has that of German filmmakers in general, since the interest of the public for their cinema began to grow again and German films begin to gain recognition abroad. This development, of course, also results from various film promotion systems in Germany, which over the last few years have been expanded to form a network: (1) Tax revenue is distributed at a regional and national level. (2) Monies are put aside by the television authorities out of license fees. (3) Sums derived from a statutory levy of DM 0,15 on each cinema ticket sold are allocated for film projects. Within this complicated system, quite disparate intentions are at work, sometimes in harmony with each other and sometimes in opposition. The commissions appointed by state authorities act as patrons of the arts. The largest film producers and distributors provide a permanent demand and a market that is never congested.

This system, which is unique in comparison to those in other countries with a similar film tradition and an ailing film industry, is attributable to the political strategies and commitment of filmmakers over the past 15 years. But whenever male German filmmakers discuss their work, they speak in terms of the filmmakers, i.e. of themselves. Only when the women have registered their protest, do they condescendingly admit to having meant women as well.

Seven years ago, in the first issue of the magazine *Frauen und Film*, Helke Sander (who founded the publication as a forum for feminist film work) was able to maintain polemically that the comprehensive discrimination against women filmmakers amounted to a prohibition on the exercise of their profession (*Berufsverbot*). As recently as four years ago, male representatives of various film promotional commissions asserted in a series of interviews in *Frauen und Film* that projects by women could not be supported, because to all intents and purposes none existed.

However, women film critics and historians had already begun long before, in close collaboration with women filmmakers at home and abroad, to collect projects that had initially not been accepted by television authorities or film promotion boards. They wrote about the "little" films by women, the cheap, inconspicuous feature, documentary and experimental films that were tucked away in late night programs on television. And they investigated as a problem, the extent to which the

"impoverished aesthetic" and lack of circulation was a conscious sub-cultural phenomenon, and the extent to which it merely resulted from official discrimination.

Training problems, poorer opportunities to get a start, and producers' lack of confidence in women directors, camerawomen, etc. — these were some of the reasons for women's being kept out of a film career, not a deliberate renunciation of such a career. These women filmmakers were born around the year 1940 and were for a ridiculously long time labeled "the up and coming generation."

Over the last five years, a number of things has happened. National film festivals have successfully shown women's films. Their innovations in aesthetics and content have been discussed by the media. New magazines founded by women have expanded the spectrum of public discussion. Establishment male film criticism was no longer able to ignore women's work, at least not with quite so much self-assuredness and complacency. This interest shown by male critics, however, has a reverse face. They are incredibly quick to *define* something as feminist, whereas women filmmakers would prefer to do without such rigid attributions.

An editorial in *frauen und film* discussed this contradiction.

"Two or three years ago we wrote against an establishment of film critics that hardly took any notice of films by women or that made malicious comments about them. Today, these same critics sometimes benevolently take films under their wing as 'feminist films' that bore us to death or annoy us. What has happened?"

Over the past five years the number of films produced in the Federal Republic of Germany and Berlin rose, and with it rose the proportion of films made by women. For two years now there has been a noticeable intake of female students into the film schools (at the German Academy for Film and Television in Berlin there are more than 50%). Thus, over the next few years even more projects by women are to be expected. But the work conditions for women filmmakers have not changed to any great extent.

Collective, non-hierarchical forms of production are still best suited to small projects. The logical conclusion drawn from this however should not be that "women's films" are "low budget films." For women who learn to say "I," to gain acceptance of their own artistic ideas, they will struggle to obtain the necessary means of realizing them. It is still as revolutionary as it has always been in a large-scale film production, whose organization is based on the division of labor, for a woman to find acceptance and respect for her own individual creativity and to have her instructions carried out.

Most women filmmakers work as their own authors and directors (i.e., they are responsible for the screenplay and direction and attempt to

articulate a maximum of personal expression in a film). That also means, however, that they have to convince people with their personal prestige in order to find backers. Like their male counterparts' work, their films are mostly produced within the framework of a cooperation between various national and regional support boards and a television authority.

Just at the moment when women are on the point of achieving a place for themselves within this production system, more and more criticism is being directed at the system — and frequently the stories of rejected, failed projects by women provide the most convincing material. Manfred Delling, for example, wrote in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (July 1980):

"Those were the days, when producers decided whether a film would be produced or not. Nowadays they are little more than the organizational executors of commissions set up by the state, or the various federal states, the Institute for Film Production (*Filmforderungs-anstalt*) and/or the television authorities, who decide what they may produce ... Thus the state of German cinema, in particular the New German Cinema, has for many years now not been shaped purely by the ideas of those who write, produce and direct films (as the state of literature is dependent solely on the spirit of its authors and publishers). No, it is controlled by the middlemen who sit on the money. Since, however, the most striking characteristic of commissions has always been timidity rather than courage, the entire support system is at the same time a preventive system."

Projects by women that do not conform to the established public opinion of what are "women's subjects" face difficulties. On the other hand, women's projects that attempt "yet again" to deal with a subject that has already come up in a similar form also have little chance. Under these circumstances it is impossible to extract from the women's films a catalogue of norms relating to a specific female aesthetic. The social contradictions specific to sex are, however, reflected in these films in film-aesthetic forms. A woman distributor justified this productive chaos by remarking that there was not merely one sort of women's film and that women did not want anything in particular. In truth they have wanted everything, and therefore, quite different things.

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This is a reprint of the introduction to a program booklet accompanying a package of German women's films touring the United States. It was published by the Goethe Institute, Munich, 1980.

frauen und film

translated by Marc Silberman

The German feminist film journal *frauen und film* has been of singular importance in establishing a women's film culture in Germany. It not only has published criticism; it has been the meeting place for women who would become future directors and the locus of organizing for a women's film union and for women's distribution and exhibition.

Following are excerpts from *frauen und film* editorials which give an indication of the journal's direction and concerns.

From the Introduction to the reprint of *frauen und film*, 1-5, 1975:

We want to address women as spectators constantly confronted with filmic images and themes. The dominant culture may not have produced these images and themes, but it reproduces and reinforces them. *frauen und film* should give women the courage to withdraw from this brainwashing and to acknowledge their own experiences. This is also true for women who work directly in the media.

From the Editorial, *frauen und film*, 6 (Fall 1975):

The forms of protest appearing within the women's movement develop spontaneously in every women's group and constitute one of its essential strengths. These forms of protest establish a non-verbal, aesthetic and emotional bond between otherwise unacquainted groups. When such groups do not consider themselves responsible to a male organization, they do not have to assimilate male patterns of interaction ... The women's methods include ridiculing traditional rituals and rejecting them as a norm, so as to reveal those rituals' limited validity and oppressiveness. The women's community solidarity confronts the male phalanx ... How do these various forms of protest express themselves on film? In content and in form? Which stands to gain public acceptance; i.e., get supported with public monies from television and film commissions? ... How can the filmmaker acknowledge and represent the process of cultural revolution? ... How can such protest succeed in a medium where men read and accept scripts and evaluate films? How can we succeed against the reasoning of friendly reactionary people who want to make the women's movement look foolish?

From the Editorial, *frauen und film*, 7 (May 1976). [*frauen und film* responded to feminist criticism as the magazine was published with the left company Rotbuch, which has men on its editorial board.]:

We want to assist women's interests in an area in which we understand something. We will accomplish this task together with others also seeking to analyze social conflicts, people unafraid of publicizing and tolerating all our problems and inconsistencies. The Rotbuch Collective has indicated this by accepting us into their publishing program.

We still are vehement apostles of the thesis that women alone in women's groups should formulate their experiences and develop their strategies. But to accomplish our strategies we cannot gloss over or retreat from reality. If we women know what we want, we must convince as many as possible to want the same.

Since this journal intends to deal with issues of the public sphere, it cannot pull a veil over the contradictions within the feminist sphere so that the non-feminist public won't notice them. To emancipate ourselves we must develop alternate organizational structures — not keep secrets but rather must unmask all questions, problems, aggressions, and even complacency.

From the Editorial, *frauen und film*, 21 (September 1979):

Four years ago *frauen und film* waged a critical offensive against sexism, coupled with a struggle for an independent, oppositional feminist culture.

This program seemingly nourished hope for better films and a feminist film culture. But we have tripped over a big stone lying in the way of this illusion — the absence of women's autonomous film production. All our issues constantly examine and describe this absence.

We've looked for a denied women's culture within film history, but it's proved to be more than a permanent search — even if we can acknowledge and describe the works of Dulac, Deren, Arzner, Lupino, Leontine Sagan, etc. as coherent elements. For those few women's films within film history correspond to male dominated culture. Film women do not inhabit a realm of oppositional culture produced by competing, rather women's film culture has been corrupted and robbed of its potentially radical otherness.

Interviews with Christina Perincioli

by Marc Silberman
and by Gretchen Elsner-Sommer

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Women's Movement art

by Marc Silberman

Filmography

Born in Switzerland, 1946, Perincioli began with experimental films; she studied at the German Academy for Film and Television in Berlin from 1968-1971. Active in the Newsreel Collective at the Film Academy, she taught at the Berlin Academy of Fine Arts 1973-1974. In 1972, she helped establish the Lesbian Action Center and the Women's Center in Berlin. In 1979, she tried in vain to get money for a television documentary on the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island and its psychological effect; instead, she published her interviews in a book. She has made, with the Newsreel Collective, numerous documentaries on student revolts, tenants' struggles, and women's issues.

1971: FÜR FRAUEN: 1. KAPITEL (FOR WOMEN: CHAPTER 1) 45 min, 16mm, color, dist: Zentral Film (Hamburg). As four saleswomen at a supermarket strike for equal pay, they discover their solidarity as women and the interrelation of their home life and work.

1975: ANNA UND EDITH (ANNA AND EDITH) 80 min., 16mm, color, dist: AG Kino (Hamburg). A group of female employees struggling for better working conditions are both frightened and encouraged by a lesbian relationship between two of them. Perincioli wrote the script together with Cillie Rentmeister. But the television producer fired her as director for not being impartial enough and then replaced her with a male director.

1978: DIE MACHT DER MÄNNER IST DIE GEDULD DER FRAUEN (THE POWER OF MEN IS THE PATIENCE OF WOMEN) 76 min., 16mm, color, dist: Basis Film (Berlin). A fictionalized documentary presents the problem of battered wives and the psychological and social

obstacles they face. Women in a battered wives' shelter help each other and finally start a new living collective.

I have constructed narratives to awaken the viewer's emotions, feelings of anger and joy. These emotions have a power that can be tapped and directed so that people become actively involved in changing themselves or their world. My films' upbeat endings represent the collective wish of those involved to show that things can work out. It's not to give directions for a mass movement nor establish models but rather to create an atmosphere of hope and courage.

I wrote the script for DIE MACHT DER MÄNNER, as I did for my first film FÜR FRAUEN: 1. KAPITEL, according to the experience lived by the women in the film. For me to work this way, the people whose story is "exploited" for the film must themselves support the film which is ultimately made. In the case of DIE MACHT DER MÄNNER, a collective from the Berlin Home for Battered Women contacted me and said:

"Great. We want to participate. It's extremely important that what we lived through get publicity. Besides, we have time now and want to get involved in something new."

They wanted a film that would correspond to their ideas. They did not simply acquiesce to my plans. I didn't approach them and say: "Tell me your story and I'll make a film out of it." Rather, we all shared a common motivation for producing this film.

DIE MACHT DER MÄNNER IST DIE GEDULD DER FRAUEN had 3.8 million television viewers. That is a prime rating for a film after 10 P.M.. Violence in marriages touches and interests all social classes. Moreover, we portrayed the issue in an easily understandable, conventional way so that people would still want to watch something about it after a day at work. I think it's important to create a dramatic film if we choose a socially controversial issue. Otherwise an in-group watches it and not those people for whom considering that issue is really new. On the other hand, conventional German television form bores me. My camerawoman and I would have preferred an "observing camera", such as we used during the video filming. After prior discussions of each scene, women acted out rather freely while we taped in a documentary style. But if you work this way, you can't expect to save every foot of film, and you face the risk that the actors won't deliver every day. We, however, had to plan everything down to a T. We divided each scene into individual camera shots. Since we received only one-fifth of the money that a network normally invests in this length television film, then you can imagine the limits of our "aesthetic freedom." Aesthetic experiments cost money if you have to meet television standards at the same time. For example, we could have cut the budget by filming in black and white, but proud color TV-owners will readily switch channels if a black and white program appears.

Of 40 reviews of the film, only four were bad. All reviewers agreed: "This

is a real social problem, and the film does not just depict men negatively." So the critics were happy. I'd also like to make a film where all women are not pitied or oppressed but strong, independent, and happy, too, but that'd probably displease half of these same critics.

I saw Chantal Akerman's *JEANNE DIELMAN* and thought it boring, maybe too intellectual. Within three minutes I could see what was coming, why it would be so slow. But then I had to sit through it. There was nothing new, damn it, except the pace. This idea in itself could have provided one scene, but not the basis of a 90-minute film. We used to shoot the assembly line work to show how boring it is, but that footage would not interest workers or make them angry about working conditions.

If you want a housewife to wake up and say, "What the hell am I doing?" you first have to give her a glimpse of the possibility of change. Only then can a woman afford to realize how shitty her own position is. If you just show once more how boring her day is, then she will tune out.

When I see what other German women are filming, I find they really avoid the politically controversial and important topics. They produce films hardly distinguishable from typical male films except they use a woman as a main character. Their films may be beautiful but do not generate useful public discussions. I'd criticize my women colleagues for not exploiting the space in the media that the women's movement has created for them. These women filmmakers could be helping the movement, not just with propaganda films. Instead they exploit this freed-up space to create their own cinematic career, just like the men.

Interview with Perincioli, November 1980

by Gretchen Elsner-Sommer

The following interview with Christina Perincioli was taped in November 1980 at the Conference on Feminist Film Criticism at Northwestern University. Present at the interview were Margaret Morse and Jacquelin Levitin. Screened at the conference was Perincioli's *THE POWER OF MEN IS THE PATIENCE OF WOMEN*.

Could you tell us a little about your background?

I served one and one-half years in the Swiss army, not as a soldier, but as an employee in the film department, where I saw all those nuclear warfare films shown to the soldiers. We in the office saw all the films, but the army showed the soldiers only one, telling them that a nuclear attack was not so very dangerous.

In my Swiss, artistic family, avant-garde and pop art had surrounded me, so Brakhage-style underground filmmaking was my next step. Content then meant nothing to me, only the picture and its atmosphere. I played with colors and lines and constructed film like a piece of music.

In 1968 I came to Berlin at age 22 from the Swiss countryside, where nothing was going on, into the bustle of Berlin's student rebellions. In Berlin, the students told me just to be quiet because I had no political consciousness. A friend suggested that I read Herbert Marcuse, which I did, and it let me understand art's importance for me. I saw that art could be a substitute for life or happiness and understood this well through my mother's life. She had been into art her whole life but somehow had been cheated by life. Perhaps we should try to make life better instead of making more and more beautiful, refined, and complicated substitutes for life.

I began to make films collectively in a documentary group that made films about the student rebellions and about people's struggles, films which would have no possibility of getting on television.

Ironically at the Berlin Film School in 1968, I ended up not making films at all but rather became very involved in politics and in the women's movement. I tried to build the women's movement by doing a lot of historical research. And I turned to radio to publicize information about battered wives. I worked with a lot of groups and had a lot of different jobs. For one year I ran a restaurant.

In 1975, I was contacted to make a television film on lesbian relations. The script I wrote with a friend of mine would have made a right-on fighting lesbian film. The producers kicked me out and filled the story with a lot of strange jokes. Even so, lesbians loved it because they were grateful to have even something clumsy. The script was very radical, but somehow you don't believe it because the actresses just spoke their parts. Also, the actresses in the film were not lesbians and were afraid to touch each other.

How was the screenplay for the battered wives film developed?

I had interviewed a lot of battered women for radio and for a book I had done on the subject. Then this group of three women (battered wives) contacted me — Addi (who became the film's main character) and the two women that she lives with (who also appear in the film). They were already a cohesive group when they came to me and so were not dependent on me. Most women find themselves isolated who have this problem and would find it a very heavy thing to make a movie about their own story. But because of their togetherness these women could handle it. The final story then is mostly Addi's story, but it contains what I had heard from all those other women.

Could you give us some specific examples showing us how you improvised with the actors?

I did not know how the women talked to each other in the shelter, for example. They acted it out for me, and I wrote the best parts into the script, which they then memorized. They were still free to improvise. And for the last sequence, we just talked about what these women were really planning to do after making this film. I wrote a script from that

and then we shot it.

The film really shows the fine relation you have with the women and your sense of community working with them. It's there right from the first shot with the women vendors laughing in the market place. There is a sense of togetherness and tenderness among those women, who are making each other laugh as the world goes on busily all around them.

Do you plan as a matter of principle to work with non-actors?

Yes. We had actors in the film, with whom I had great trouble. But with these three women, it was their film, and they were so good I couldn't have told them how to act. They knew a lot of things naturally about conveying the problems of battered wives that I could never have told them.

To actors you are always saying things like, "Now, don't speak so loud." You always have to tell them that, because they get paid for making loud noises and extravagant gestures and so overact. Also, some actors have to be mothered all the time. You have to take care of them not only during the shooting but also after, so they will be ready to act again the next day. Some actors always need to be built up. I can't do that.

Did the women need to be encouraged? Did they need to be told, "That's good"?

No, they could relate to the rest of the group and so they felt good about what they did. An actor played Max, Addi's husband.

How did he feel about representing a battering husband?

He made a lot of effort, yet I don't know how much he understood his role. The reason that I wouldn't want to work again with actors is because they have so little to offer from inside. It's like paper compared to what nonactors have to give.

Furthermore, the crew was nearly all women and everybody liked each other. In fact, they are all still friends, even now. It was always relaxed.

Could you talk about the violence in the film and how you decided to portray it, and why?

We wanted people to understand what it was like for a woman to be beaten, but we didn't want to show violence as stimulating or exciting to watch. We start the film with a scene of violence where Addi's husband follows her into the street, pushes her down, and beats her. He actually kicks her in the stomach again and again.

The next time we refer to violence is in a long take of Addi in the hospital waiting for the doctor. Over this long take, you hear a cool medical report narrating the results of Addi's beating. Not only does this downplay visual depictions of violence, it also shows how institutions react by making women into a mere piece of paper, a clear medical

report that does not show how women hurt.

So the first violent scene really stands for all the violence. You can't bear that violence all the time, but we had to show it once as it really is, and not as it's frequently seen on television and in films. We see a lot of rapes and slapped women's faces on television, but we are not always aware of it because somehow there it looks normal that a man should react that way. television makes you feel that this guy couldn't do anything else but that. We wanted to show the ugliness and cruelty of real violence to women.

How did you attempt to do this?

Rape is mostly very short in films and somehow elegant. We show how it can be very long as a man keeps on kicking, slapping, and punching a woman. This sense of on-goingness makes a difference and feels very ugly. Especially in a normal movie, you would never see a man kick a woman in the stomach for such a long time. The film shows action that men would be ashamed of. There is nothing chivalrous or manly about what happens. It is just plain ugly.

In the film, Addi realizes that part of her husband's problem stems from the fact that he was beaten as a child and the fear that he has that she will leave him. The film is sensitive to Max's problem, too, and shows some understanding of it.

What was Addi's husband's reaction to the film?

We were all very afraid of what his reaction would be. We sent Addi out of town for a few days when the film was first shown on television. Even the neighborhood bar, which appears in the film, closed down for the evening, because Max often drinks there. They were afraid that he might cause problems. However, he was very calm.

Another woman did come to live with him and he beat her too. Finally, she left him. When this woman left him, he couldn't stand it. With men who beat their wives, after the women leave them, they usually fall apart. Max couldn't function. He lost his job, then his car. He felt he had nothing, no strength, and committed suicide.

It is a very sad story. These men don't know how to ask for help, nor even see that they need help.

Why is the camera so often distant from the action?

I felt no need to go in close to show people's noses. In these depressing scenes, the camera does not move at all, as if the weight of the scene expresses itself in the weight of the camera. In setting up the shots, it depended very much on how Addi felt as to how we'd move the camera. In all the scenes where she is a little strong and happy, we hand held the camera. All the scenes where she is depressed were filmed on a tripod. Although we had sensed it while shooting, we did not see that dichotomy

until later.

How do you feel about this film in relation to your other films?

I like this one best because the reaction to it has been best. However, we had a long list of issues we wanted to treat, and from those we made the film. If we had had the whole film in mind and not just episodes, perhaps we would have been more aware of the dramatic line. It feels clumsy now. When I first made films, I was not interested in content, just atmosphere with lines and color. Now this film seems totally the opposite. We didn't care about atmosphere but just wanted to show information, and it feels like a heap of information, one item after another.

Yes, but that makes it Brechtian. A seamless attachment of narrative continuity would work against many of the distancing effects that you have achieved. The discontinuity allows the beatings to be seen as historical and social phenomena and not simply as an unfortunate story. Do you want to make political films in the Hollywood narrative style?

No, but we often show a dramatic situation here, and then it is over, with no build-up or connection between some scenes.

What would you have liked to do differently?

If we had a little more money and a little more time, we would have shot it more like a documentary. When we worked with video the actresses did a lot of improvisation, but when we worked with the cameras we had to be more exact. For instance, take the first scene in the kitchen. Max comes home from work with a present for the child. He goes and wakes up the child. The child cries. The man gets hungry and more and more angry, until the point where Addi leaves. We shot this scene many times in video, and the last time we shot it, it was so beautiful. We just ran after them with the video camera, in the kitchen and out, with beautiful natural light streaming from the windows. You couldn't see every detail. It wasn't straight dialogue either — you couldn't understand every word. I found it more interesting than what we finally shot in film because the viewer has to be more aware of what is going on. What we did finally looks very much like television with every corner lit and everything told to the audience

Why did you choose to make a narrative film? Is this a form you always want to work with?

Sometimes I'd like to do something very, very different. Here, an impressionistic film with a little of this and a little of that would not have worked. We were describing a strong woman's struggle to escape from a kind of hell and we had to be precise. Now I am trying to find a way to pull together all the feelings that we have about our environmental crisis and nukes, all the fears people have and how this affects our lifestyles. Something artistic that people could understand

could be done without narration because we all live in this world and we all have these fears and concerns. I'd like to capture that spirit in an impressionistic way, in a way people could relate to and say,

"Yes, that's it. That's the style. Yes, that's hurting me."

This way we could reach people on a level that they already recognize but teach them to see it more deeply. To be accessible to a large audience and make a point, one does not have to stick to narrative form.

Tell about your work with radio.

It's not so important to make a film as to reach people. I can pick up my Sony and work for radio stations. Then I not only get paid but also reach a lot of people. If there is something I want to say or if something happens, I can very quickly tell people about it that way on a huge scale. If I were to pick up my camera, maybe the work would be finished in a few months or in a year. I'd have trouble scraping the money together. And then it would be shown only in groups that already knew about the situation.

Here in the United States, I've done interviews with people from Harrisburg and with American Indian women. In radio, you do not face as much supervision or control as you do filming for television. Somehow the people who control radio don't think of it as very important, because I can say things there that I cannot on television. Radio is popular in Germany. A lot of people play it all the time, like people in the United States turn on television during the day. In Germany, television is only broadcast from 6 p.m. to 11 or 12 p.m.

Also, I just did a book about Harrisburg and Three Mile Island and put it out with a big publishing house. They have an enormous distribution, so I will reach a lot more people than I could have with a film. 70,000 copies sold in the first weeks. Not only was I effective, but also I got paid well for the work that I did.

Could you talk about the different women making films in Germany today and the differences between you and other German women filmmakers?

Women making films in Germany are not necessarily feminist. Helke Sander is a feminist and an old Movement fighter who did a lot of films that could be used immediately in the Movement, such as a brilliant film on contraceptives.

When I got together with a group of other German women filmmakers in Los Angeles, we all had great difficulty in liking each other's work. Helga Reidemeister was the most political, and so we had something in common.

For most of these women, film represents a profession. They find it important to make a beautiful work and get famous. I want to make

films but also to change things, maybe by making a film, maybe by doing something else. Helga is like that too, but you'll find few others who want to fight first, before making beautiful movies. I criticize that very much.

I get the feeling that the feminist movement fought in many areas such as television and film, so that women could get more respect, opportunities, and money. Many women now taking advantage of these opportunities don't come from the women's movement but get all the places that the women's movement fought for. They make films by women but do not contribute to the women's movement. They may make good films, I don't deny that, but they do not contribute to the kind of discussion that would help us move a little further.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Interview with Erika Runge "One Brick in a Large House"

by Marc Silberman

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Filmography

Born 1939, Runge studied literature and theatre (Ph.D.). She has no formal training in filmmaking. She was active in the student movement. She pioneered in film and book publishing, using the format of interviewing socially oppressed individuals. Numerous film and book prizes.

Selected publications:

- *Bottroper Protokolle* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1968)
- *Frauen: Versuche zur Emanzipation* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1969)
- *Reise nach Rostock DDR* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1971)
- *Südafrika. Rassendiktatur zwischen Elend und Widerstand* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1974)
- *Kinder in Kreuzberg* (Berlin, 1979).

All of Runge's films were produced by television networks and therefore most are not at this time available for general commercial distribution.

1968: WARUM IST FRAU B. GLÜCKLICH? (WHY IS MRS. B. HAPPY?) 45 min., 16mm, b/w, dist: Schonecker (Essen). A miner's wife tells about her personal history as a woman and a worker and about labor history in Germany's most highly industrialized region.

1970: ICH HEISSE ERWIN UND BIN 17 JAHRE (MY NAME IS ERWIN AND I AM 17) 75 min., 16mm, b/w, dist: Bavaria. Describes job opportunities for youth and the conditions under which they are integrated into the labor force.

1975: MICHAEL ODER DIE SCHWERIGKEITEN MIT DEN GLÜCK (MICHAEL, OR PROBLEMS WITH HAPPINESS) 83 min., 16mm, color (no commercial distributor). An unemancipated wife uses her

housework as an instrument of terror in the family without realizing that her private needs are also social needs. Her communication problems also affect the children.

1975: OPA SCHULZ (GRANDPA SCHULZ) 86 min., 16m, b/w (no commercial distributor). A fictional portrait of a senior citizen who tries to play a responsible role in his immediate community.

1981: LISA UND TSCHEPO, EINE LIEBESGESCHICHTE (LISA AND CHEPO, A LOVE STORY) 85 min., 16mm, color (no commercial distributor). Runge's first film in which she directs professional actors is about a black South African refugee, living in West Germany, who falls in love with a German secretary. At the end of the film, he returns to South Africa to fight for independence.

Project: ANNA LOUISE, a contemporary film comedy about a 20-year old assembly line worker. She suddenly discovers that the yellow hat she inherits from her grandmother endows her with magical powers. Although she accidentally loses the hat, Anna and her women co-workers have gained an instrument of power which they continue to use for their own needs.

My first film came about as the by-product of a fiction film which I have yet to make. In 1967/68 West Germany experienced its first economic crisis since the wartime recovery, and it was particularly acute in the highly industrialized Ruhr region. I was active in left politics (SDS) and, with the naiveté of the left students at that time, I went to the Ruhr in order to live the revolution, which we expected there, and to make a film. I brought along a tape recorder (I don't know the dialect of the region) and did many interviews so as to develop a script. First I produced a book from the material (*Bottroper Protokolle*), and then I was commissioned to make a film—the documentary WARUM IST FRAU B. GLÜCKLICH? The film was unusual because it showed a working woman who was interesting and articulate — something new in West German film. That film won six prizes, so the door to TV opened to me. Thus I "fell" into the documentary genre, but it has made reality accessible to me in a unique way.

I wanted to make my next film together with apprentices but found that difficult, not least of all because of the conditions of production for television. But I learned how to work with amateurs who contributed their own experiences to a dramatic idea which had already been established but not yet completely formulated. ICH HEISE ERWIN was thus a quasi-documentary fictional film.

In the meantime, I have had it with the documentary approach. I find I can elicit different stories from one and the same person — love stories or political stories. Although I decide the point of view, I work with someone who, through me, through my work, can transmit something. I must step back completely in order to do justice to this person. Such a documentary technique does not sufficiently stimulate my imagination,

and it neglects utopian elements. That is why I have turned away from documentaries. I find other possibilities arise from the play of emotions in fiction. Fiction offers a different kind of appeal to the audience and other possibilities of making contact.

I have only partially been able to actualize such utopian aspects, as with OPA SCHULZ. This commissioned film about a 72-year-old man was about someone I could not really identify with. Again, I did some research — always important for me — by visiting senior citizens up and down the streets of Berlin. It was very depressing. Someone born in 1900 has participated in two world wars and experienced unemployment, fascism and the postwar period — a life of catastrophes. Most of these people are simply worn out, exhausted, but I didn't want to make a film which merely demonstrated what an awful life that was. It's terrible to film someone who works on an assembly line saying, "It's awful to work on an assembly line." No assembly line worker would want to watch that, just like no senior citizen would, either. So whenever I heard in their stories something like "I'm still going strong," or "I still want to have fun," I extracted it. I felt I was pouring their stories through a sieve so as to fashion a character, an active personality with a history. The film was rather popular.

In ICH HEISE ERWIN, I had to face how to make a documentary about young people, who are more likely than senior citizens to make demands or have some ideas which should not be altered by someone else's interpretation. But young people also may not have a clearly delineated sense of self, let alone the ability to articulate that sense coherently. Someone who has gone to school for only 6 or 8 years probably has difficulty trying to express something quickly and precisely, if s/he has not been involved in working for 2 or 3 years. It's hard to put ideas into lucid form, content, and context, as is required in the production of television films. Ultimately, the apprentices weren't even interested in this. In fact, they had an authoritarian fixation.

"Here comes this broad and she's got her own idea about a TV film she wants to make. Why the hell does she always ask us about what she's supposed to do? Let her figure it out herself. In other words, you've got credentials, so why bother us with discussions?"

I have a problem developing my film language and haven't explored various possibilities enough. The kind of documentary films I make deal with contemporary themes which can never be played on sets or in some kind of staged environment. The stage is already set when we enter an apartment where someone lives. For example, my film MICHAEL ODER DIE SCHWERIGKEITEN MIT DEM GLÜCK has a scene in which the mother is supposed to break down in tears because she doesn't know which way to turn. In my opinion, the scene didn't work at all. Although a non-professional can command a variety of feelings or be induced to call up many emotions in certain situations, that person cannot express strong feelings convincingly. That takes professional training. I can't

shoot a close up of a face showing horror when my nonprofessionals can't show that. Also, they get worse with repeated takes. Whenever I want to work with professional actors, the producers say: "You know how to work with amateurs so well. You'll never get such lively scenes with professionals."

I've used feminism to find myself. I spent quite a while trying to fit myself into history and understand my position as a woman. Some of my work revolves directly around women's problems. Now I think the decisive struggle is being waged between classes, not between sexes. Nevertheless, I see a tremendous developmental process occurring between men and women and in individual women. I myself partake of this process; but I have already solved for myself many of the problems feminists confront. I see myself primarily as a leftist (with Marxist leanings) and that is how I consider my commitment to women's issues.

You cannot make films for everyone. Changing consciousness becomes a complex problem. We should look at a film as one brick in a large house, or maybe more realistic, as one stone in the facade of a skyscraper! I make each film trying to reach a particular group.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Interview with Ula Stöckl Do away with taboos

by Marc Silberman

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Filmography

Born 1938, Ula Stöckl worked as a secretary in Germany, England and France, 1954-1963. She studied at the Film Institute in Ulm 1963-1968 with the auteur filmmakers Alexander Kluge and Edgar Reitz. She lives in Berlin. Stöckl was one of the co-founders of the Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen (Association of Women Film Workers) and sits on the selection committees for the Hamburg and Berlin film festivals.

1968: NEUN LEBEN HAT DIE KATZE (THE CAT HAS NINE LIVES) 90 min., 35mm Techniscope, color, dist: Basis Film (Berlin). Four women become fed up with dependency and decide to pursue success, but they recognize neither the social context of their oppression nor their common interests.

1973: EIN GANZ PERFEKTES EHEPAAR (A QUITE PERFECT COUPLE) 90 min., 16mm, b/w, dist: Basis Film (Berlin). The theory and practice of an open marriage come into conflict when the partners can no longer uphold equality and their mutual expectations. Men's prerogatives -husband's and lover's — usurp the wife's demands for honesty.

1976: ERIKAS LEIDENSCHAFTEN (ERIKA'S PASSIONS) 64 min., 16mm, b/w, dist: Basis Film (Berlin) and Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany (Washington, DC). Two women (or the personification of two aspects within one woman) struggle with one another to decide why their relationship has declined. With mutual reproaches, they trace their respective self-hate while they wait for someone (a man?) who will save them from themselves.

1983: DEN VÄTERN VERTRAUEN GEGEN ALLE ERFAHRUNG (TRUST IN THE FATHERS DESPITE EXPERIENCE) 30 min., 16mm, color (not yet released). One part of an omnibus film called DIE ERBTÖCHTER (THE HEREDITARY DAUGHTERS) made by six

German and French women filmmakers.

Project: DER SCHLAF DER VERNUNFT (REASON SLEEPS) ca. 90 min., 35mm, b/w. A contemporary Medea adaptation set in Berlin tells the story through the eyes of a woman who is confronted with her 20-year marriage and two grown daughters.

Project: An autobiographical film about a woman searching for film financing but in the genre of a western or adventure film.

I have had luck financing a film a year since 1968. Two of my early films were made with my teacher and friend, Edgar Reitz. After that I was able to get money from the TV networks, which supported an artistic climate here. In 1973 I received money from another network (WDR), but for the first time I was confronted with censorship. I was too modest then and too dumb to recognize it. The producer — a man I respected and considered my friend — asked me to reduce my budget by 90%. He said that was all he could give me, and I thought it was purely a matter of economics, not censorship. After I had rewritten the script to satisfy him, I suddenly had doubts about it and changed it — not to be more expensive but more radical. Production was stopped until I rewrote the script according to instructions.

I was one of the first women filmmakers in West Germany before the women's movement. As far as the men were concerned, I was "just" a woman. I never conceived of my films as "women's films" or about "women's themes" but as stories about partners, either explicitly as in DAS GANZ PERFEKTE EHEPAAR or implicitly as in ERIKAS LEIDENSCHAFTEN. I have made no films about women alone, even if men are absent.

Perhaps you could call NEUN LEBEN HAT DIE KATZE the first women's film in West Germany. I am interested more in women because I knew more about them. Moreover, I relegated men to the dream images they have of themselves as absent. We see no men in the film, just women who live only for their relations with men. Today, more than ten years later, I think the struggle has shifted to another arena: Can people live together permanently at all?

Every person experiences this struggle, even men. My work "with" women also concerns the men with whom they live. For who could imagine women without their men? The women's movement is not just the province of women. At a time when women are completely without rights, we need the movement as an absolute necessity. Can men learn from us and begin to see their own misery at the same time that we women attempt to make films about emerging from our misery? If so, then the women's movement will have seen its time.

In NEUN LEBEN HAT DIE KATZE I chose the characters as types: the not-yet-married professional woman, the recent divorcee confused about her future, the career woman, the deceived wife and the ultimate

dream woman — a legendary Circe. In this film the women seem to be sleeping because each thinks only of herself and that she has an advantage over the other. Each one thinks she has a recipe for happiness, or that being unhappy is her own fault because she's too dumb to be happy. In other words, these women cannot see their anxieties as having something to do with the society in which they live. They exhibit a lack of knowledge about how one could behave differently. In my films now, the characters perceive each other more clearly and recognize their shared misery as something they don't have to be ashamed of — as in ERIKAS LEIDENSCHAFTEN.

I haven't made a film since 1977. I worked for four years on a script which was rejected in blatant censorship by funding sources everywhere. Apparently my personal radicalism must have shocked producers who consider themselves "feminist." What I perceive as radical is to do away with taboos, to write down my dreams and images.

My script, KILLERTANGO, deals with three women — a grandmother, her daughter and her granddaughter — and the pressure passed on from one generation to the next to fulfill contradictory demands. Dramaturgically I made the mother die, so as to free the daughter. It had to happen in a way that would teach the daughter something. That is, the mother died accidentally, when she sucked her lover's penis and he held her so tightly that she suffocated. For me this symbolized the daily suffocation millions of women experience as the result of male demands. Apparently this image was so violent that everyone rejected it out of hand. I am unwilling to drop it. Every artist reaches a point where she either accepts the conditions for continuing her work, conditions which make her lose track of the broader picture, or she refuses to compromise. (Translator's note: KILLERTANGO was never funded, and Stöckl has given up on the project.)

I have never been active in the women's movement and have been criticized frequently for that. Yet the women's movement developed parallel to me. I was already making films when it began to organize and formulate goals. I considered radical separatism absurd. Moreover, the leaders of the organized women's movement in West Germany completely ignored my work. Indeed the fact that I had already achieved what they were still struggling for was counted against me. For them I was a "man's woman." In any case, I need a certain amount of independence and my commitment is more meaningful through my film work.

I have often been asked why I don't make films about women workers. The answer is directly related to my feelings about the left. In West Germany it was purely a student movement. Although I studied at the Film Institute for five years, I was never really a student and saw the left as elitist. Our aims were the same, but they were so involved in their word games and their struggles with one another were uninteresting. In the women's movement, too, women can never come together around common goals. However, I do confront the ideas of both groups as the

very basis of my work.

In the film scene, documentary realism continues to rule, and imagination is unwanted because no one pays for it. The films we see are the ones "allowed." To make those, you don't need imagination. Backers are so confused about their ability to judge that they have lost all their courage. Behind every film lies the commercial question: "How much will it earn?" Ten years ago we experienced a paradise in filmmaking, but now we face an enormous bureaucracy. It is not that we are explicitly persecuted as radicals, but you don't live without fear in a country which keeps everything on file.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Interview with Ulrike Ottinger Surreal images

by Marc Silberman

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Filmography

Ottinger was born in 1942. She studied art in Munich 1960-61 but had no formal training as a filmmaker. She has worked as a photographic, collage and graphic artist in Paris, 1962-1968. She directed a film club and alternative art center in Constance, 1969-1972. Since 1972 she has lived in Berlin.

1977: MADAME X — EINE ABSOLUTE HERRSCHERIN (MADAME X — AN ABSOLUTE RULER) 141 min., 16mm, color, dist: Filmwelt (Munich). Using the pirate film genre as an ironic framework, the film examines role behavior and the difficulties of breaking with traditional models. A group of women sail off on the Chinese junk *Orlando*, only to find that they reproduce the same behavior among themselves to which they were subjected in a male-dominated society.

1979: BILDNIS EINER TRINKERIN — ALLER JAMAIS RETOUR (PORTRAIT OF AN ALCOHOLIC — TICKET OF NO RETURN) 108 min., 35 mm, color, dist: Basis Film (Berlin). Conceived as a melodrama, this portrait undermines the audience's desire for a utopian resolution by showing alcoholics driven to isolation and self-destruction. Two women — one wealthy and intent on inducing alcohol poisoning, the other poor and drinking herself to death — together make a tour of the Berlin "scene."

1981: FREAK ORLANDO: KLEINES WELTTHEATER IN FÜNF EPISODEN (FREAK ORLANDO: SMALL THEATER OF THE WORLD IN FIVE EPISODES) 126 min., 35mm, color, dist: Basis Film (Berlin). Orlando, a symbolic figure who changes sex and lives through centuries, journeys through the human and social labyrinths of Western culture. She encounters freaks and outsiders on her way. Those who control power structures and defend normalcy are males. The film is filtered through the satirical vision of a woman who sees history as that of the patriarchy.

I find myself rather isolated in the German film scene, particularly among my women colleagues, because my films come out of the tradition of fantasy and surrealist filmmaking. Besides that, my experience as an artist, especially in Paris during the sixties, is rather unusual for a filmmaker. My eyes have become extremely sensitized to visual images. My film BILDNIS EINER TRINKERIN, for example, on one level offers a sightseeing tour through Berlin. I construct my films with images. I use a syntax of images, whereas most German women filmmakers seem conventionally tied to dialogue. I seek new images for the new content which is proposed by a woman's experience. This may be why spectators often complain about my films' length and dense imagery. They are not accustomed to an associative style, beyond psychological motivation.

I don't think it is adequate to show things "as they are" in a film. I don't think you can do that today. There was a counter-movement ten years ago against formalist films. Even fiction films then presented things "as they were," certainly an unpretentious goal. In my film BILDNIS EINER TRINKERIN, quasi-documentary scenes alternate with extremely stylized ones. I introduced this technique because I realized that Berlin filmmakers often made the quasi-documentary with tremendously precise film content, but formally lifeless. The public for these films has already developed a critical consciousness and watches a familiar reality on film — so familiar that the public doesn't see, or doesn't want to see, what goes on around them.

I work self-consciously with fragments of reality in a collage process. For example, in BILDNIS EINER TRINKERIN, I have integrated many other noises — both artificial and real — into the original sound track to broaden associative possibilities. Earlier I never had the money to record on-the-spot sound. Here I could afford a sound crew, but still used the old process. Basically, I attach little value to traditional narrative film. I work in a completely different way. In my films I introduce ironic "quotes" of films or images. In other words, I use traditional cinema's clichés for my own purposes.

I had so little money for MADAME X that I was forced to work collectively from the start. I wrote the script and did the camera work. I had the notion of a pirate film. The ship was a metaphor for awakening, basically into the adventure of reality. Then I began to consider which women I could possibly work with, according to the roles. An artist on roller skates justifies her escape to Madame X because of her dissatisfaction with the academic culture industry; she speaks directly into a microphone. A beautiful prostitute with wonderfully developed body language had to find another way to articulate herself, and I just let her move. Nor does the third-world woman speak; she expresses herself by means of gestures and dance. Yvonne Rainer plays the artist (I had intended to play the role myself originally) and obviously could write her own text. I dissolved the shots of her into details — the roller skates, her hands, her mouth. Another woman spoke a curious mixture of several

languages. With her, I'd write something and then ask her how she would say it. In this way the film incorporates many expressions typical of the women.

Although the film focuses primarily on the moment of awakening, I try to make clear that the enthusiasm of waking up cannot last because reality itself offers a mixed bag of pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Nonetheless, desires for escape and change should remain. All the characters die. All their traditional, socialized patterns of behavior must die or at least be disrupted to create new possibilities. In addition, the film investigates role-playing, the impossibility of rationally determined female or male role-playing.

I consciously formulated the contradiction between Madame X as a master and her promise of freedom. Madame X does not represent a person at all but rather a kind of power machine. She moves mechanically, just like her image, the ship's figurehead. She represents me, power, and traditional hierarchical structures of behavior. I find it remarkable that awakening, which has become a mass gesture in the women's movement, runs its course within the same hierarchical, patriarchal patterns. I wanted to show this contradiction as our reality, one that stuns and disturbs, and to emphasize that we have to take seriously the residue of behavioral structures which have been chiseled into us for centuries.

Amazingly, I find that there is always a figurehead which the women's movement follows — and above all, within these traditional patterns. I find the movement itself very important, but I still need to gently critique it. We have given too little thought to the power of traditional structures. Surely, they must be broken down, but each of us falls back into the old patterns. Therefore, women in the film find a new identity that is only slightly different, not an ideal one. Yet changes only come step by step. I find it unrealistic to make a film in which women revolt and triumph gloriously.

Marianne and Juliane / The German Sisters **Baader-Meinhof fictionalized**

by Lisa DiCaprio

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On October 18, 1977, three members of the Baader-Meinhof gang, condemned to life imprisonment in the high-security Stamheim prison, were found dead in their cells. Andreas Baader and Jan-Karl Raspe had been shot through the neck; Gudrun Ensslin was discovered hung. Prison officials maintained that the prisoners had committed suicide. Although it went to great lengths to substantiate this claim, the German state could never explain how handguns had found their way into the isolation cells of Baader and Raspe. Many members of the Left, not only in Germany, but in Italy and France as well, challenged that official explanation. Among those who refused to concede to the state version of the deaths was Gudrun Ensslin's sister, Christiane. Christiane's experience forms the subject matter of *THE GERMAN SISTERS*, and to her von Trotta has dedicated the film.

THE GERMAN SISTERS⁽¹⁾ is the latest in a series of films by actress-turned-director, Margarethe von Trotta, which deal with political themes as they touch on the lives of women. She has said that this film, the German title of which is *DIE BLEIERNE ZEIT*, or "heavy, leaden years," concerns "the continuing weight of the past on the present." In fact, she depicts two "pasts" — one, of Nazi Germany, which has laid a heavy moral burden on von Trotta's own generation; and the other, of the Baader-Meinhof gang itself.

At the height of Baader-Meinhof activity, from about 1969 to 1977, the German state engaged in massive wiretapping, intimidation, and harassment of radicals. Over 300,000 members of the Left were interrogated. Many among those who refused to collaborate were persecuted for activities with which they had profound disagreement. Most of those whose lives were touched by the Baader-Meinhof group were never the same again. One life so influenced was that of Christiane Ensslin. Von Trotta has chosen to dramatize the tremendous strain of this period of state intimidation — and its "continuing weight" today — by examining the lives of the two Ensslin sisters.

THE GERMAN SISTERS roughly covers the period shortly before Ensslin's capture in June of 1972 (after three years of underground life) and her death in Stamheim prison in 1977.⁽²⁾ Although in many ways the film parallels the real lives of the sisters, von Trotta does not offer a narrative that renders their history exact, but dramatizes the conflict between the two sisters. While the character representing the sister Gudrun Ensslin, played by Barbara Sukowa as "Marianne," has chosen to become a member of the Baader-Meinhof group, the character based on Christiane Ensslin, played by Jutta Lampe as "Juliane," actively works in the women's movement and writes for a feminist magazine. In the film, the sisters share a common moral outrage at Germany's past and present, but their conception of how to act on this outrage pulls them in opposite directions.

The intense political conflict between Marianne and Juliane provides the vehicle for von Trotta to deal with a multiplicity of themes in her film: Von Trotta's own life and her generation; the two Ensslin sisters' political evolution; the Baader-Meinhof group's history; the conflict between feminists and women who remained within the male-dominated Left; and the Holocaust.

When the state captures and imprisons Gudrun (Marianne), Juliane suddenly must deal with the state's repression of the Baader-Meinhof group while attempting to maintain her feminist perspective. Following Marianne's murder, Juliane becomes obsessed with uncovering the reasons for her sister's death. Her personal and political activities become entirely reordered. All of Juliane's activities become focused on exposing this state political crime.

A "labor of mourning," according to von Trotta, "can be related to a person, but also to a country." Juliane's obsession symbolizes von Trotta's generation's efforts to come to terms with the Holocaust. Von Trotta has said,

"We were quick to push aside guilt and responsibility. The tendency in public life not to admit feelings of guilt at all, or at least to forget them as quickly as possible, still exists."⁽³⁾

As recently as 1978, 24% of German respondents to a survey agreed to a statement that "'National Socialism' was a good idea badly carried out."⁽⁴⁾ One year after this survey was conducted, the U.S. television series, HOLOCAUST, was broadcast in Germany. According to *Variety*, more than 15 million West Germans saw HOLOCAUST and responded favorably.⁽⁵⁾ Nevertheless, more than 50 years after the fact, the subject of Nazism once again initiated national debate. Prior to the series' showing, several groups of demonstrators protested HOLOCAUST as anti-German. Some stations which showed another related program, THE FINAL SOLUTION, were bombed.

To broadcast HOLOCAUST represented a significant political decision on the part of German media. This television series exposed millions to images and issues from the Nazi period, which mainstream German

television and cinema rarely have dealt with. In his article, "German Filmmakers Seldom Focus on the Legacy of Nazism," *New York Times* critic Tony Pipolo writes:

"For all their seriousness and their willingness to be critical, few German filmmakers working in the commercial mainstream of the industry have openly confronted the most troubling subject of all: the World War II period and its twin evils, Nazism and the Holocaust. There are signs that this is now changing, and that some filmmakers are beginning to approach this difficult historical legacy head on and to make links between the past and the present. But for the most part, these ghosts from the past have been either avoided or indirectly hinted at as the dark specter that haunts the lives of characters and may be at the root of the undefined malaise within contemporary Germany."[\(6\)](#)

Among those confronting the Holocaust are directors of the New German Cinema, such as von Trotta. In fact, she belongs to the same generation as Gudrun Ensslin, born in 1942 — only two years after Gudrun. Von Trotta, too, experienced the bombing raids of World War II. She, too, deeply experienced the Holocaust's legacy as a child.

Through a series of flashbacks in *THE GERMAN SISTERS*, von Trotta firmly establishes her character' — the two sisters' — sense of guilt for the past. She describes how each formed a social consciousness, which serves to bind them together throughout the ordeal of Marianne's imprisonment. The film indicates both sisters were raised in a heavily religious background. In real life, Gudrun and Christiane Ensslin's father served as a pastor of the "German Evangelical Church." This church was formed in 1945, the year of Hitler's defeat. It claimed its origin in the "Confessing Church," formed in opposition to the Hitler Reichskirche — the unification of 29 German Protestant churches. As part of its ritual, it stressed examination of conscience. The Ensslin children were educated to be against rearmament and for reunification, to concern themselves with social problems, especially those of the Third World.

As we see this process of coming to social awareness in the film, Juliane and Marianne's first exposure to the crimes of the Hitler era comes from viewing a newsreel made at the time of the liberation of the concentration camps.[\(7\)](#) They and we see depictions of corpses — thousands being turned over, lifted up, and buried in huge mass graves with bulldozers. Survivors, barely skeletons, stand and lie in their familiar striped camp uniform. The film within a film presents the Nuremberg trials, where everyone claims innocence. As the documentary's narrator states the national problem:

"'I'm not to blame,' says the Kapo. 'I'm not to blame,' says the officer. Then who is to blame?"

From these common roots, however, von Trotta's two sisters evolve in

opposite political directions. Why? Von Trotta implies that Juliane's feminism comes as a natural outgrowth of her early rebellion. Flashbacks show us Juliane as the nonconformist. She acts the role of the real rebel, while Marianne stays safely on the sidelines. Called on to recite a poem by Rilke in school, Juliane refuses saying,

"I prefer the 'Ballad of the Jewish Whore.'"

She gets thrown out of class, while Marianne remains and does not protest. Juliane is also always being reprimanded for her choice of clothes, which she wears as an emblem of nonconformity. In contrast, Marianne attempts to mediate family conflicts by playing father's favorite, a tactic Juliane very much resents. Here, the Ensslin father is depicted as a typical German patriarch, symbolizing the traditionally authoritarian character of German society.

THE GERMAN SISTERS, then, does not provide an objective treatment of the two sisters, but very much gives a partisan defense of Juliane. No real reference is made to the process of Gudrun Ensslin's real-life transformation from student antiwar activist into terrorist. We know from the film's flashbacks to childhood that the character Marianne felt compelled to act from a sense of moral urgency. But why did she choose the specific route of joining the Baader-Meinhof group? From a psychological perspective it appears that Marianne is drawn to the rigidity of Baader-Meinhof lifestyle, where critical thinking was often suspended in the name of preserving strict discipline. Thus the film offers a partial, but inadequate, explanation of how some left activists have turned to terrorism. Von Trotta even implies that Marianne's conversion resulted from a relationship with the man for whom she left her husband, rather than as an independent decision.[\(8\)](#)

If von Trotta has very clearly weighted the scales in Juliane's favor, the character Juliane provides a vehicle for von Trotta to express her own search for moral identity. Von Trotta's own priorities are feminist. Yet she realizes the parameters history imposes on one's free will. From the film's beginning, von Trotta establishes the two sisters' interdependency, despite their intense political disagreements. Marianne's life (and then her death) constantly intrudes on her sister's, just as the Holocaust haunts all aspects of German politics today. Juliane attempts to maintain a safe distance between her and Marianne, but she cannot.

In the film's opening sequence, Marianne's husband, Werner, attempts to persuade Juliane to assume responsibility for the son, Felix. (When Ensslin went underground, she left behind her husband, Bernard Vesper, and an 11-month-old son, Felix Robert). Werner, a writer, has been offered a position outside of Germany. Juliane rejects his suggestion, saying that she will not let her own life be ruined while "Marianne is attempting to save humanity." Felix then figures prominently throughout THE GERMAN SISTERS. As a child in need of care, he provides a connection to Marianne that Juliane cannot sever. Felix represents an extension of Marianne, a responsibility that

progressively makes its weight felt on Julianne's life despite her will.

The film's next sequence shows Julianne speaking at a women's demonstration demanding the repeal of Paragraph 218, the German abortion law which has remained virtually intact since Bismarck first unified Prussian Germany. Julianne denounces the hypocrisy of those who oppose abortion. She cites statistics about German women's oppression — 30,000 cases of abortion a year, 20,000 children put up for adoption, 300,000 women forced to live in temporary housing. This scene establishes Julianne's identification with the average German woman, for whom Marianne will only exhibit contempt.

In the first two sequences, then, we gain an appreciation for Julianne as an intelligent, sensitive woman committed to pursuing her career and political work. We sense that Julianne has carefully laid out the course of her life, with almost "German precision," as she meets her personal and political responsibilities with an ordered discipline. Although the feminist issues Julianne raises have revolutionary potential, she always operates within the legal boundaries of capitalism. She faces minimal risks to her personal safety. And her political activity is related to her paid work on a feminist journal.

Julianne's life, however, soon becomes disrupted. Marianne emerges from underground and immediately confronts the legitimacy of Julianne's personal and political priorities. In marked contrast to her sister, Marianne lives an entirely unpredictable day-to-day life. Her whole existence is a secret one, as she must live in fear of arrest, with no dependable source of income or housing.

Marianne first makes her presence felt while Julianne is at a meeting at work. Julianne receives a call and then announces that she must leave, with the abrupt,

"I've been looking for her for two years."

Julianne and Marianne meet secretly in a commentary statuary warehouse, prefiguring Marianne's death. Marianne appears disguised in a wig and wearing stark clothing. Her features are tensely drawn. She waves aside Julianne's concern for her safety.

As they sit down to drink coffee, Marianne confronts her feminist sister with the self-righteous tone that will characterize all her future discussions,

"Are you still working for the magazine? Do you really think it is important, absolutely essential work?"

Nothing that Julianne can do will win Marianne's respect or appreciation. Similarly, when Julianne informs Marianne that Marianne husband has committed suicide, Marianne responds impassively,

"He had a penchant for death — a neurotic intellectual."

Marianne moves on to her practical concerns — asking that Juliane care for the son. Again, Juliane refuses,

"You are always trying to cast me in the role you don't want anymore."

Marianne ends this, her first discussion with Juliane in two years, with the statement,

"Ideas are not acts. Older women cannot wage the class war."

Who is the "older women," since the distinction in age between the two sisters is not that dramatic? Probably Marianne means women tied to job or family responsibilities. Since she narrowly defines "class war" as confined to terrorism, Marianne negates both women's oppression and women's ability to participate in significant political activity.

Unconvinced by Marianne's harsh criticism, Juliane returns to her world of "ideas" and political organizing. We see Juliane assembling an exhibit about Hitler's policies toward women. Hitler said,

"Giving birth ennobles women. It is woman's sacrifice for the survival of the nation."

In Nazi Germany, not having children was considered subversive. Juliane's work gets interrupted as Marianne is arrested.

Despite their intense conflicts, Juliane immediately drives out to the prison to visit Marianne. Juliane must submit to the humiliation of stripping, and then she is made to wait in an empty visiting room. While waiting, she flashes back to their childhood. Scenes of the two girls' competing against each other in a running match are superimposed on the brick prison structure. Their competition has continued through adulthood, alternating with their deep sense of mutual dependence. Juliane is awakened by the matron with the words, "Your sister won't see you." The matron gives no reason. Deeply hurt, Juliane is consoled by her boyfriend who suggests as an explanation,

"That lifestyle (of the Baader-Meinhof group) makes people numb."

He suggests that she write a letter asking how to help.

Finally, the two sisters do meet in prison. While psychiatrists look on and take detailed notes, the two characters shout at each other. Juliane screams,

"Your bombs ruined it all, all of our work."

To Marianne, of course, Juliane's "work" is worthless — perhaps even evidence of selling out to the system.

An earlier scene had dramatized Marianne's contempt for ordinary

people's lives and daily routine. At 3:00 a.m., Marianne and her male comrades burst into Juliane's apartment. Marianne makes herself at home. She insists that she have coffee over Juliane's objection that the grinder will wake up the entire building. The two sisters do not converse. Finally, as she is leaving, Marianne runs up to Juliane's room and begins systematically to go through Juliane's clothes, rejecting each piece of clothing, and throwing it on the floor with undisguised contempt — "There is nothing here I can use."

Juliane experiences this as a double affront. Not only has Marianne invaded her privacy, assuming that what belongs to her sister must also rightfully be hers. But in expressing distaste for the clothes Juliane needs for work, Marianne once again condemns Juliane's life-choice of political activity. Later, when in prison, Marianne explains her actions, "We gave you your last chance to join us," Juliane responds,

"If I had done that, if I *had* joined you, I couldn't be here today to help you."

Marianne's prison demands are many, and we see Juliane preparing several packages. Juliane's boyfriend reprimands,

"You are wrecking your life for her."

Juliane answers,

"I will never agree that nothing can be done."

Juliane's ability to act, however, often gets restricted by Marianne's own purism. At one point, in the prison, the two sisters quickly exchange sweaters. Inside Marianne's sweater, Juliane finds the note:

"Get your liberal friends to do something."

Juliane is persuaded by her own magazine staff to write an article on her sister. Then Marianne attacks the article with a vengeance, screaming, "Are you writing for the Springer press now? (Axel Springer maintains a virtual monopoly on the Berlin press and is notorious for his yellow journalism.)[\(9\)](#) Again, Juliane attempts to help her sister, but faces rejection.

Despite our alienation from Marianne's self-centered rigidity, we share Juliane's horror at the German state's increasing brutality. We begin to see, in very vivid terms, the process of Marianne's destruction. Ironically, she becomes more human for us as she begins to lose her self-confidence. At the hands of her jailers, Marianne must suddenly confront reality; as a result, she becomes less the stereotype of a political robot. In one particularly memorable scene, which begins with two sisters' usual outbursts of political disagreement, Juliane asks,

"If you consider yourself an elite, why are you asking for ordinary treatment?"

Marianne is on the 25th day of a hunger strike to protest treatment of the Baader-Meinhof group members in prison. One member, Holger Meins, would die on November 9, 1974. Marianne has already lost 10 pounds. Juliane asks, "Why are you destroying yourself?" Marianne shouts back with eyes flaring,

"Do you know what they are doing to us? I am in a cell by myself. They keep the lights on all day and night so I can't sleep. I pound on the cells next to me. There is no one there. The cells are empty. There is no one to talk to. I listen to my breath entering my mouth and leaving through my nostrils. They want to kill us."

Later, we see Juliane attempting to simulate force-feeding through a tube so she can experience for herself the treatment Marianne is undergoing at the hands of the prison "doctors."

During what is to be their last visit, a new sense of understanding emerges between the two sisters. In the dehumanizing conditions of prison, Marianne's features become transformed; they seem softer and more relaxed. Now Juliane and Marianne must speak via microphones through glass. They can no longer touch each other. Juliane says,

"I dreamed that I set you free."

As the visiting time draws to an end, Marianne's face begins to fade away as she asks with urgency when Juliane will return. Marianne is visibly disturbed to hear that Juliane will not be back for two or three weeks. With some reluctance and at her boyfriend's suggestion, Juliane has decided to take a vacation and plans to return in time for the trial.

Outside of Germany, Juliane cannot relax but is constantly thinking of Marianne. We see Juliane and her boyfriend in Sicily looking down into the rim of Mount Etna, an active volcano that symbolically represents their situation. The "explosion" occurs while the couple is in a restaurant and Juliane's boyfriend sees Marianne's face for a brief moment on the television screen. Neither can understand nor speak Italian to know what has taken place. Juliane rushes to a telephone, calls home. She learns that Marianne has been found hanged in her cell.

Next, the film flashes to the prison where Marianne's body has been laid out. Her sister, mother and father are present. We see the body from a distance as if it had been properly embalmed with all traces of the death Marianne encountered erased. Slowly, the camera accompanies Juliane to confront the corpse's distorted face, Marianne's eyes wide open, as at the moment of death. In the final invasion of her privacy, the final humiliation and vengeance by prison officials, the German state has its last word in laying out Marianne's body to "rest" in the most grotesque form, denying the sanctity of human life.

(This scene reflects the difficulty the Ensslin family had in real life finding a cemetery willing to bury the dead members of the Baader-

Meinhof group. That real-life burial was shown with actual footage in the film GERMANY IN AUTUMN. Many Leftists attended the ceremony with red scarves concealing the lower part of their face so as not to be identified by the German police. Later, visitors to the graves of the Baader-Meinhof members were required to produce identification cards.)

Confronted with Marianne's unexpected death, Juliane begins to prepare a case to prove that the hanging was not suicide, as claimed by prison officials, but murder. This preparation will take many years. (In real life, Christiane Ensslin did carry out such an exhaustive study which will soon be published in German.) Juliane studies medical reports, simulates the hanging, and enlists the help of a lawyer. She becomes obsessed with the case. At one point, her boyfriend shouts at her,

“Nobody will believe you. We have a lifetime ahead of us. A lifetime with a corpse between us. You're destroying yourself and you want me to watch. You are ruining ten years of our lives.”

Juliane's boyfriend's words seem to represent a realistic position in terms of the issue of exposing Marianne's murder. In many ways, Juliane's relationship with her boyfriend is presented as a positive one, in which each lover respects the other's career and shares in household tasks. However, he mainly fears jeopardizing the security of their shared existence for a political cause. He initially feels sympathetic towards what Juliane is attempting to accomplish, but he rapidly replaces that with resentment towards Marianne.

Viewed within the framework of von Trotta's overall theme of moral responsibility, this young man's "realism" has a negative connotation. He is a "good" person who commits no evil acts. But his resignation in the face of adversity is a form of complicity with evil. It was, for example, on the suggestion of her boyfriend that she re-direct her energies in a "positive" direction, that Juliane left Germany on a vacation, thus being absent at the very time of Marianne's murder. His pessimistic statement, "Nobody will believe you," can also be seen as meaning "Nobody can grasp the Holocaust."

Hitler, after all, did depend on the very monstrosity of his crimes for protection. One can easily grasp a regime's selectively executing its political opponents. But the wholesale extermination of millions based on arbitrary considerations of ethnic background and sexual preference — this almost surpasses human imagination. Several decades later, in 1977, the average German would have difficulty believing the assertion of the German Left that prison officials would murder members of the Baader-Meinhof gang (shortly before they were to go to trial) and then make their deaths appear to be the result of suicide. In terms of the scale of human life involved, of course, we can make no comparison between the Holocaust and the murder of Baader-Meinhof members. But von Trotta demonstrates for us that the issues involved in both historical instances are the same.

Her boyfriend's challenge to Juliane, "Do you really think you can accomplish anything?" thus stands for the fundamental question, "Could fascism's rule of terror have been successfully resisted?" No definitive answer to this question can be given. We know that Hitler's most active opponents were rounded up in the first hours of the Third Reich. Yet the complacency of millions of "good" Germans was essential for the Nazis to successfully carry out their aims. Juliane's boyfriend may offer an accurate appraisal of the task Juliane has set for herself. But it is with Juliane's determined effort that von Trotta would have us identify. In subtle ways, von Trotta poses the question,

"If no effective opposition is organized against this crime (the murder of Baader-Meinhof members), who will be the state's next victims?"

As *THE GERMAN SISTERS* approaches its conclusion, we see how Juliane has become as relentless searching for the truth as Marianne had become in her commitment to the Baader-Meinhof group. Yet, when Juliane calls the press, she is informed,

"Nobody cares anymore. Your sister, the movement — that was the 70s. Now people are interested in the energy crisis, the Third World."

When Juliane pleads, "But my sister was trying to draw attention to the Third World," the editor responds,

"You know the rules of journalism. If it is not current, it is useless — it can only be used in book form as an historical subject."

In the final sequence, we see Juliane with Marianne's son, Felix. Earlier we had seen Juliane and a woman doctor visiting Felix in the hospital, where he was covered with bandages from burns, unable to move or speak. While he was in a cave where he often played, someone threw in gasoline and lit it. Felix was set on fire because his mother threw bombs. After this incident, which occurred to Gudrun Ensslin's son in real life, Juliane must finally assume responsibility for Felix's care. Traumatized by his near death, Felix exhibits tremendous anger at both Juliane and his mother. He expresses outrage at Marianne by ripping up a poster of her, shredding it into small pieces and throwing it out with satisfaction. Juliane watches with understanding, knowing the source of the anger. She responds quietly, without reproach but with firmness,

"Your mother was a fine person. Someday I will explain it all to you."

With the same determination that informed his mother whom he now hates, Felix commands, "Begin now" This shout ("*Fang an*") not only means: Preserve Marianne's memory. But on deeper reflection, it can be interpreted as a general moral command: "Tell my generation

everything" Thus, the child's command is the basic imperative of von Trotta's own work.

Finally THE GERMAN SISTERS poses these two questions: How are we to view the political legacy of the Baader-Meinhof group? And what is the responsibility of the German Left to the Baader-Meinhof group?

For the first question, von Trotta passes an obviously negative judgment on the political value of Baader-Meinhof activities. The Baader-Meinhof group, which arose in 1970, was Germany's first urban guerrilla group. It represented a desperate response to the lethargy of the German proletariat, presumably bought off with an abundance of consumer goods.⁽¹⁰⁾ All that the terrorists have accomplished is to perhaps relieve their guilt for living in an imperialist nation.

Thus, when Marianne is displayed in her coffin, there is a marked contrast between her contorted physical image and the soaring, religious organ music in the background. Marianne, in death, is finally at rest in her soul and spirit. She, and the film, have renounced the "new Germany" which attempts to forget its menacing past through the pursuit of materialistic aims. As Gunter Grass, who knew the real Gudrun Ensslin in Berlin, said,

"She was idealistic, with an inborn loathing of any compromise. She had a yearning for the Absolute, the perfect solution."

While we are left with a very definite impression of Marianne's character as a terrorist, THE GERMAN SISTERS leaves open to interpretation how to view Juliane. Von Trotta contrasts Felix's decisive demand for truth with the negative results obtained by Juliane when she finally presents proof of Marianne's murder to the press. In the end, the film does not show whether or not Juliane will pursue her investigation and continue her attempt to get her findings published. She has committed herself to a task which may be futile. Juliane has destroyed her 10-year relationship with a sensitive man, and we may presume that she has lost her job at the magazine. In exchange for giving up her personal happiness and abandoning her feminist work, Juliane seemingly has run up against a dead end. How are we to judge her? Von Trotta herself spoke about such issues earlier, in 1980, and her words delineate the political boundaries of her concerns:

"Hope arises from the realization that you have to find the way back to yourself. This is less of a rallying call than a pessimistic statement. Personally I see very few chances of exploding the power complex established by the alliance between economics and science; and above all, I see no movement on the present political horizon capable of achieving this. I believe we still have a very naive approach to this terrifying power complex. Naturally I fight against it despite my skepticism; for it is certain that those who do not offer resistance are already defeated. To propose new ideas is

the duty of art. Just the same I doubt whether it is possible to put these utopian ideas into effect. But because I am alive, I fight.”

THE GERMAN SISTERS thus expresses the strengths and weaknesses that also characterize the works of von Trotta's two well-known contemporaries in the New German Cinema: her ex-husband Völker Schlöndorff and the late Rainer Werner Fassbinder. The films of all three directors are unsurpassed for their incisive critique of the moral corruption of German society and for relating the past to the present. However, the collective weakness of these directors lies in their deep cynicism about the potential for any significant social change. THE GERMAN SISTERS has a strong emotional impact on the viewer, and it challenges us, but it does not point to any political direction by which we can collectively meet this challenge.

Notes

1. THE GERMAN SISTERS was the original title of the film when it premiered in Chicago during the November 1982 International Film Festival. The film was released commercially in New York as MARIANNE AND JULIANE. Its German title was DIE BLEIERNE ZEIT.

2. A German audience would know much about the Baader-Meinhof group. For U.S. viewers, information needs to be supplied for a full appreciation of THE GERMAN SISTERS. Gudrun Ensslin was involved for some years as a student activist at the University of Tübingen and the Berlin Free University. In 1967, Gudrun rejected open political work and began to engage in terrorist activities. In October 1968, Ensslin and three other Baader-Meinhof members were found guilty of bombing and setting fire to a department store and sentenced to three years imprisonment. In June 1969, they gained release from jail, pending an appeal to be heard in November 1969. The Supreme Court rejected the appeal. Ensslin and two members went underground. After a brief stay outside Germany, Ensslin returned to Berlin in early 1970. She was rearrested on June 7, 1972. Ensslin was tried at Stammheim for murder, bank robberies, forming criminal association, etc., and sentenced to life imprisonment.

3. Tony Pipolo, "German Filmmakers Seldom Focus on the Legacy of Nazism," *Sunday New York Times*.

4. This survey is analyzed in an article, "The Imperfectly Mastered Past: Anti-Semitism in West Germany since the Holocaust" by Frederick Weil, *New German Critique* (Spring/Summer 1980).

5. According to Weil, the impact of the TV series HOLOCAUST as far as *altering* existing public opinion in Germany seems varied, depending on the specific question posed to those surveyed. For example, in polls conducted shortly before the showing of the U.S. program in Germany, 16% of those surveyed thought that all adult Germans in the Third Reich

were guilty to some degree. After the series, this figure rose only 6 percentage points to 22%. Similarly, prior to HOLOCAUST, 45% of those interviewed believed that Germany had a moral obligation to make reparations to Holocaust victims. After the series, an additional 10% held this opinion. According to Weil (who was in Germany at the time HOLOCAUST was broadcast), the only issue on which HOLOCAUST had any discernible political effect was about the war crimes statute of limitations. After HOLOCAUST, those who favored enforcing such a statute diminished from 62% to 50%. Weil writes,

"Since the Parliament voted several months later to lift the statute of limitations and permit war criminals to continue to be brought to trial, the film's effect on this issue may have been very great indeed, even if it only encouraged an already existing public opinion."

Such a positive finding, however, must be placed in the overall context of German public opinion on the Nazi period. Analyzing HOLOCAUST within a historical framework, Weil concludes,

"A quarter or a third of the population still refuses to find the historical Nazi regime all bad, although there is a long term trend towards rejection."

[6.](#) Pipolo, op. cit.

[7.](#) According to the information presented in Pipolo's article, it is unlikely that the Ensslin sisters would have actually seen such newsreels. Only in 1962 did the Ministers of Education formulate standards for teaching the history of the Third Reich, thereby allowing for such subjects as the Nazis' goals, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust to be introduced into the German school curriculum.

[8.](#) In reality, Ensslin brought her lover, Andreas Baader, into organized political activity. The turning point in Gudrun's decision to reject mass political organizing appears to have been the killing of a young student protester, Benno Ohnesorg, at a protest against the Shah of Iran's visit to Berlin in 1967. The demonstrators lined up in front of the German Opera House. Police began to disperse them using water cannons. A group was trapped in a courtyard. A policeman shot Ohnesorg in the back of the head, claiming self-defense, although Ohnesorg was actually running away in the opposite direction. Gunter Grass called the killing, "the first political murder in the Federal Republic." On June 8, 8,000 turned out to hear the funeral orations.

At an SOS meeting during this period, Gudrun seemed at the point of hysteria. She shouted that "the fascist state" is out to "kill us all" and argued that "violence must be met with violence." She emphasized,

"It is the Auschwitz generation. You can't argue with them."

The policeman responsible for Ohnesorg's murder was charged merely

with "careless manslaughter" and found not guilty — a scenario of police brutality which finds similar expression in the United States.

[9.](#) In an earlier film, *THE LOST HONOR OF KATHARINA BLUM*, von Trotta deals with the destructive effects of the sensationalist Springer press. The film is based on the novel (with the same title) by Heinrich Böll. Böll himself was held up to ridicule by the Springer press for denouncing the "trial by press" of Baader-Meinhof member Ulrike Meinhof. In his novel, Böll creates the fictional Katharina Blum. She becomes involved with a man who, unknown to her, is a political fugitive from the law. Blum refuses to cooperate with the police, steadily maintaining that she knows nothing concerning the fugitive. She is taken to task by the Springer press, which pursues her case with such a vengeance that first her reputation and then her life are entirely ruined.

[10.](#) The bombing and arson charges for which Gudrun first served time in 1968 show the extent to which she had become almost pathologically alienated from the German people. The Frankfurt department store bombing in which Gudrun participated was inspired by an earlier department store burning at A l'Innovation store in Brussels. At least 300 people perished in this fire which the terrorists immediately declared a success because it "brought Vietnam home to Brussels" and showed ordinary complacent consumers what it was like to be bombed in Vietnam.

A leaflet circulated May 24 at the Berlin Free University where Gudrun attended classes had the caption, "When Will the Berlin Stores Burn?" It ended with the exhortation, "Burn, warehouse, burn." Gudrun and other took up the call. In court, she claimed responsibility for herself and Andreas Baader explaining,

"We did it out of protest against the indifference towards the war in Vietnam."

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Interview with Helke Sander Open forms

by Marc Silberman

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Filmography

Helke Sander was born in 1937. She attended acting school and then accompanied her husband to Finland, where she worked in theatre and television. In 1959, she gave birth to a son. She returned to Germany in 1965 and studied film at the German Academy for Film and Television in Berlin (1966-1971). She has been active in the student left and the women's movement, and a founding editor of *frauen und film*. In 1974-1975 she taught at the Academy of Fine Arts in Hamburg.

1967/68: BRECHT DIE MACHT DER MANIPULATEURE (CRUSH THE POWER OF THE MANIPULATORS) 50 min., 16mm, b/w, no commercial distributor. This documentary film shows the power of the Springer Press conglomerate in formulating and manipulating public opinion".

1971: EINE PRÄMIE FÜR IRENE (A BONUS FOR IRENE) 50 min., 16mm, b/w, dist: Zentral Film (Hamburg.) Among the first films in Germany to point to the interrelations between the public and the private spheres, this film examines, in the mode of the "Berlin Workers' Films," the difficulties of a young woman worker trying to cope with problems at home and work.

1977: DIE ALLSEITIG REDUZIERTER PERSÖNLICHKEIT: REDUPERS (THE ALL-ROUND REDUCED PERSONALITY: OUTTAKES) 98 min., 35mm, b/w, dist: Basis Film (Berlin) and Unifilm (N.Y.). This essayistically constructed fictional film draws the portrait of a woman who is trying to cope with her roles as mother, photographer, artist, girl friend and member of a women's group. It poses the question — without offering a tidy solution — of what a woman sacrifices if she wants to be true to herself while still being open to change.

1981: DER SUBJECTIVE FAKTOR (THE SUBJECTIVE FACTOR) 138 min., 16mm, color and b/w, dist: Basis Film (Berlin). A film about the

student movement in the sixties which reconstructs that history from the woman activist's point of view.

I was always ahead of my time with my films. In 1969 a project of mine about the women's movement was a novelty, and no one was interested. What's more, the funding commissions told me since a known feminist couldn't possibly be objective, I couldn't do it. Then they were so disgusted with my film project about menstruation (to be called RED PERIOD), they didn't even want to deal with the topic. It was meant to be neither an educational nor a documentary film, but a film about myths. For it, I was advised to try for ten minutes on the weekly TV health program. The projects I have devoted a lot of work to, the ones I really wanted to make, never succeeded.

I became politically active with the Springer film (BRECHT DIE MACHT DIE MANIPULATORE, 1957/ 68). I didn't want to adapt some crazy popular idea of art. We filmmakers had discussions then trying to figure out how to still make films, didactic ones that relied on a form that was understandable and accessible to the audience. Yet a completely false conception of filmmaking was developed in this school of Berlin Workers' films. My next film, EINE PRÄMIE FÜR IRENE, in the tradition of the Berlin Workers' films, in some ways critiques the tradition. I strove to translate political content directly into film. I only slowly moved away from that position, recognizing that it came to no more than slogans.

I also faced a problem of isolation. If a film took up a political issue, television networks wouldn't make funding available, so we had to produce films for political meetings with little money or material. Many filmmakers felt obliged simply to document something when officially there was no information about it. And political groups were suspicious of "aesthetics." This reductionism was mutually conditioned.

In REDUPERS I took up once again something I had already done, but now with a different consciousness. In the sixties I'd been doing theatre and made some short films, but I was interrupted when the whole political movement began. REDUPERS reflects on what was left behind. I did not intend to show change but rather how minimal changes may come about, how things happen simultaneously. I tried to examine how we think and in what categories we articulate feelings, and what the consequences would be if we were to think like the women in the film. In other words, I ask the viewer to consider a given situation from an alternative perspective, namely a divided Berlin from a woman's perspective. It's a subversive procedure, perhaps even a form of utopia. The viewer must think out the consequences on her/his own.

I vehemently resist any attempt to ghettoize my films as "women's films." Men or women can interpret any situation. The way I see life necessarily has something to do with my experiences, and women's experiences are, of course, different from men's.

I have had some experience in trying to gain access to institutions. For example, in 1974, founding the film journal *frauen und film* represented our effort to articulate the problems that women have in this profession. We faced unbelievable criticism, a defamation of the whole attempt. Professional female film critics did not want to participate at first in something so controversial, something that might fail. Women filmmakers doing their own thing were not really looking for publicity. The journal strove to codify women filmmakers' problems in order to remedy them, and it has made a real contribution here. We reviewed the few films by women that existed at the time, which were too often rejected by festivals because we had no lobby and only men in the juries, who didn't understand what the women were doing in their films. In addition, as a result of the women's movement, public consciousness no longer brands everyone as crazy who points to sexism in the media.

I am especially concerned with developing new production methods. When we receive a contract and financial support (from a network, prize money or producers), we have to show results very quickly — for example, a completed script. I would prefer to work more essayistically, filming very slowly, and then maybe finishing up quickly. I don't want a filming schedule which says you film the script in 30 consecutive days, engaging each actor weeks in advance. I want to write while filming and work together with the actors. I don't want to chase them through a scene, each one standing in the "right" corner for the "right" angle.

I imagine pre-conceived situations, with an idea about how they will look in the film. Elements of tension and changes come when I see actual image. That is my point of reference, not some idea about an image. Concrete images come into relation with other concrete images. I can imagine a rather open form somewhere between fiction and documentary — as in *REDUPERS* — where fictional people enter documentary films. I want to continue working in this direction, but find no money for such a form. We get money based on our scripts, which must be completely written to submit to the various funding commissions. That implies certain compromises if I do not want to accept the repressive nature of the script.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The All-Around Reduced Personality: Redupers Women's art in public

by Lisa Katzman

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In writing about male-dominated narrative film, feminist film critic Claire Johnston makes this point:

"The fetishistic image portrayed relates to male narcissism. Woman represents not herself, but by a process of displacement the male phallus. It is probable to say that despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent."[\(1\)](#)

In recent years a genre of women's cinema has emerged that challenges, subverts, and transcends not only the *images* which male-dominated cinema associates with women but the fetishistic symbolic value which Johnston characterizes male-dominated cinema as attributing to women — a value which bankrupts female characters of a complex subjectivity of their own or at best reduces it to a formal stratagem of male psychology: an aspect of plot or dramatic action. In short, in much male-dominated cinema, women function to create psychological conflict, to further the plot by providing a motive for action or being the vehicle of it. Rarely are the women characters' own lives, visions, and subjectivity regarded as adequate to comprise the central concern of and reason for making a film. In the past ten years, however, women filmmakers as diverse as Sara Gomez, Yvonne Rainer, Sally Potter, Michele Citron, Chantal Akerman, and Helke Sander have succeeded in making films that put women at the center. Although these filmmakers take up radically different formal, conceptual, thematic, political, and aesthetic considerations, they share an active desire to represent woman as woman, not as spectacle.

Helke Sander, in her film *THE ALL-AROUND REDUCED PERSONALITY*,[\(2\)](#) uses the structure of the traditional narrative to reveal the strength of the main character, Edda. The story Sander tells

reveals a commitment not to betray the actual economic and political exigencies intrinsic to any real life story. In particular, Sander shows the ways they cut with a special double edge into Edda's life as a single parent and an artist. As the film does this, it exposes the limitations of traditional male-dominated narrative practices, which generally only touch upon such exigencies' outer perimeters. Previous narrative practice has dealt more with economic and political factors only as they confront female characters rather than getting to these factors' sexually oppressive construction.

THE ALL-AROUND REDUCED PERSONALITY opens with a long tracking shot of the Berlin Wall. Filmed at eye level, the camera emphasizes the wall's ubiquity and its presence as a seemingly natural part of the landscape. We are disarmed — not by the wall's physical monumentality — but on the contrary, by the variation and discontinuity in its size and texture. In places the wall is made of barbed wire; in other places, of mortar and bricks grown over with ivy, like a cemetery wall. An unassuming viewer would probably have trouble identifying the Berlin Wall here from almost any single frozen shot. But Berlin is the film's location and largely what its subject shall be. If the sheer continuity of the wall that emerges in this long tracking shot does not confirm one's suspicions as to its identity, the handwriting on the wall will. We see the wall covered with graffiti: hammer and sickle, political messages, and the recurrent initials KPO/ML. From the start Helke Sanders posits the wall as the film's central visual metaphor, thereby establishing both the psychological and geographical locus of THE ALL-AROUND REDUCED PERSONALITY.

While these opening shots' foreground our sense of place, the next sequence comments ironically on the dubiousness and ambiguity of Berlin as a place or a city. A postman delivers a letter to the film's protagonist — Edda Chiemnyjewski, played by Helke Sander herself — asking her to read the (presumably) English writing on the envelope. The note is to the postman and says that Berlin has a special international status, neither in West or East Germany, so he (the postman) should ask President Carter where it is. This scene juxtaposes the hard physical reality of the wall as boundary, established in the opening scene, to the ambiguity of Berlin's "international status," how the world sees it but isn't sure to what country it belongs. The line, "Ask President Carter where it (Berlin) is" hints at a pervasive cynicism, which one of Edda's friends expresses more blatantly later:

"It is in the American interest that Berlin exists."

As the central visual metaphor of the film, the wall represents Berlin's paradoxical nature. The wall both defines the city and makes Berlin have a "special status" in relation to the world, a status at once problematic and ambiguous.

A photographer and divorced mother, Edda is divided between the demands of motherhood and her art. As a free-lance photographer she supports herself and her daughter largely through the photographs she

sells to the daily paper. After her encounter with the postman, we see her on her way to shoot the last run of the Berlin-Hamburg steam train. As she is leaving, she lifts her young daughter up, kisses the girl, and hands the child over to her roommate to hold. Her daughter clings to her long scarf. Edda cannot pry the girl's fingers loose, and so she disentangles the scarf from her neck, leaving it to dangle from her daughter's hand as Edda dashes out the door.

The film cuts to Edda waiting with three male photographers on a foggy embankment standing around a tripod. At this point for the first time a narrator's voice cuts in.

Sander uses the voice over — a documentary convention — as a way of distancing the viewer from the characters, as epic theater does. The narrator's intermittent interjections signal various conceptual contexts. These are the contexts within which Sander feels the viewer should consider the ongoing narrative at that particular point. Here, the narrator indicates this is strictly business, an assignment rather than a chosen subject to photograph. We see Edda impatient, anxious to get it over with, tapping her foot. "Payment," the narrator tells us, "thirty deutsche marks." A telescopic shot through the barbed wire mesh of the Berlin Wall shows a train, framed by the circular edge of Edda's zoom lens. "Still the wrong train," the narrator comments, as we, the viewers, marvel for the time at the closeness, the direct proximity of that "other side" to where Edda stands in West Berlin. Following this scene comes a montage sequence of shots of Edda's working on other assignments, always accompanied by the narrator's voice informing us of how much was paid for each job.

From these shots of Edda's working and the narrator's ironic commentary, we learn that Edda's energy and interest in her subject matter exceeds the nature of the hack work the press employs her to do. We see Edda spot toning her pictures by hand, her roommate calling to her to get her negatives out of the bathtub, her work continuously in process. In her darkroom she commiserates with a photographer friend about Agfa's raising the price of paper. We see the paper as it changes from silver to plastic — it's a form of modernization that places an enormous financial burden on the freelance photographer, the person least equipped economically to handle it.

Clearly Edda's efforts are overspent in relation to what the press pays her, and the over-investiture of her time cuts into time she needs to spend with her daughter and to work on her own photographic projects. Working for the paper compromises her artistic ambitions, and motherhood constrains them. The economic exigencies of her life (as reported by the narrator) make her attention to her work — that attentiveness and genuine concern with which she approaches the subjects of her photo assignments — difficult and untenable to support. In relation to her job, we see Edda in what appears to be a no-win situation. It is in her relations with a collective of women photographers that she manifests that part of herself that her job neither supports nor

fulfills.

This group of women photographers has received funding for documentary projects about the city. The narrator gives a detailed account of how the women were awarded the grant after applying for it two years earlier. We also learn about the arts council's ulterior motives. With an election coming up, the council members calculated they needed to demonstrate publicly their support of feminism. And the council, both its male and female members, knew they could fund a women's group less than they would have to fund a group of men or a mixed group. But the women of Edda's group are only too delighted to get funded at all.

But when the women assemble to look at each other's photographs, they see that clearly the documentation they have produced is not what, as they correctly assume, the arts council expects. Rather than coming up with Sunday-supplement style, humanistic shots of working women in Berlin, they have — independently of each other yet unanimously — all chosen to focus on how Berlin's sociopolitical situation is reflected in the city's architecture, particularly in the wall.

In presenting her photographs to her group, Edda says differences between East and West Berlin are always being emphasized, but in her photographs she seeks to explore similarities. These similarities include cars and subways, as well as graffiti; Edda adds, "In the East, graffiti is official; in the West, unofficial." The second thing she says commands her attention and photographic interest are the wall's holes: "These are the holes," she says, "where the information leaks through, the love stories and the mutual energy supply" — all of which defy physics.

In their photographic work, the women give an expanded, new political context to the wall. Thus the wall gains a conceptual frame within the film. Even the title reflects the theme of East-West differences and similarities, which are symbolized by the wall. To say "All-Around Reduced Personality" is to provide a Western twist on the "all-around realized socialist personality" promoted by the East Berlin radio station that Edda listens to.

The photographs that Edda and her friends have taken of the wall lead to the women's artistic and political strategy. They choose to expose to public view the hypocrisy which exists between the image West Berlin likes to maintain of itself, as a "free" city and part of the "free world," and the kind of repression or blocking out of mind and sight that such a convention depends upon. The photographs also provide the occasion for two concepts of feminism to collide: the photography group's and the art council's.

From the standpoint of the arts council that has commissioned the women in order to deck out its own feminist sympathies, the council does not want to focus on the wall because it has a fixed and parochial view of women's issues. In effect, it needs more to project a public image of itself as a liberal feminist sympathizer than to see the connection of

"women's issues" to West Germany's "broader" social issues. The arts council's attitude is reductive. It brackets feminism as a sociological curiosity rather than as the organization of critical insights and judgments.

The arts council cannot see that feminism is a perspective that has as much legitimacy when it penetrates the ideological and political ramifications of the Berlin Wall as when it deals with "women's problems" of rape and abortion. While the arts council considers only certain subjects germane to feminism, Edda and her friends understand how the dynamics of sexism, like capitalism, permeate every aspect of life. Furthermore, the arts council's circumscribing of certain social problems (day care, rape, and abortion) to women's issues becomes a form of social domestication, a way of naturalizing these problems and thereby diverting attention from them.

As Edda and her friends continue to discuss the project, they realistically expect the arts council to withdraw funds if they insist on showing their photographs of the wall. That assessment consolidates and radicalizes their commitment to the project. As one of the women says,

"Then we risk or we lose everything, not only the billboard project but our careers."

She's not referring to the sort of hackwork Edda must do to support herself but to the women's careers as artists and perhaps as political activists. In rejecting the art council's liberal, pseudo-progressive definition of feminism and exercising their artistic autonomy, the women begin to realize a deeper, more complex vision of feminism.

The women want people to look at the wall so as to impel people to think about everyone's complicity in legitimizing the subtle and insidious forms of social repression that have increasingly come to dominate West German life. They and the whole film posit an implicit connection between this concern and feminism. From what Sander presents of the characters, she implies that the women must raise political consciousness about repression in West Berlin. The populace will never learn how sexism is naturalized if they don't see how much more generalized forms of social repression permeate their lives. This argument's logic may seem grim from an idealized feminist point of view. But the women of the photography collective are well enough seasoned politically to understand that indirection often provides the best and most expeditious way to effect political change.

When the arts council rejects the pictures, it also provides focus, an object lesson in the social construction of meaning. Because it does not share the photography collective's critique of culture, which would enable it to see how sexism and social repression are linked, it misses the photographs' metaphorical meaning.

Like the characters in the photography collective, Sander herself refrains

from polemicizing political persuasions. She relies on the quality of the characters' interactions with one another to convey the women's artistic intentions and political convictions. Sander has a particular deftness for capturing the nuances of their political and aesthetic orientation in the inflections of their style, their behavior and conversation, their judgment and gestures.

The stark, flattened black-and-white tones of much of the film's images come off as a minimalist, stylized version of the photojournalism that the film depicts. The cinematic style borders on aridity. Yet in the scene in which the women show their photographs and decide to do the project without the funding of the arts council, the film's grainy surface combined with the spatial composition of the women and the suffusion of late afternoon light contributes a painterly quality.

Here we see a distinct departure from the framing style and tonal qualities that mark the rest of the film. Here Sander presents the women working together with an absorbed and quiet intensity. They sift through photographs, critique each other's work, and deliberate and debate about what they want to do in contrast to the art council's expectations. What Sander captures in this scene is a vision of collective work that is idyllic and lyrical without being idealistic or fantastical.

Here is an image of women working together, through their own volition, out of a common artistic and political vision rather than under the aegis of patriarchal capitalism. Such images are rare and rather unprecedented in Western Europe and U.S. culture. By affording us such a view, Sander compels us to imagine a form of social organization in which work does not remain identified with competition and exploiting workers.

Just as Dziga Vertov's *MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA* established a radical and joyous vision of work in post-revolutionary Soviet society, celebrating work as the socialist appropriation of modern technology and industrialization, so Sander depicts work as a non-alienating activity. Moreover, Sander's portrait of the women's collective photographic enterprise challenges the modern, Western, patriarchal image of the artist as a singular, striving, solipsistic individual. While the almost dizzying staccato rhythm of Vertov's cross-cutting reflects the exuberant utopianism of his vision of industrial power in a Marxist society, the stylistics of Sander's tableaux are equally reflective of her vision of collective artistic work. The type of work presented in each of these films differs. What the films share is a vision of work that does not polarize work and pleasure. To this end, both films go far in engendering images of a new form of social community.

During their meeting in the sequence I just described, the women choose one of Edda's photos to blow up and mount on a public billboard. Once they have done so and all stand back to check it out, they come to a startling understanding that an unsuspecting viewer could mistake their great blown-up photo for an advertisement since it appears right next to one. The possibility that their picture might

become eclipsed in the public eye by the plethora of commercial billboards registers with bleak irony. Implied in their reaction is this sad lesson. If society has neither eyes nor ears for the images and voices of social and political resistance, if it cannot recognize such resistance, then it is probably further down the road to totalitarianism or fascism than any of the characters had imagined. In that case, the women's efforts would be rendered futile anyway. But the women continue to mount their photos about the city, carrying one with a flourish of bravado into the very real-life situation it reproduces. This shot has a particular extra-diegetic significance for the viewer. It offers Sander's wry wink at the audience, her way of spelling out how she identifies her filmmaking process with the photography enterprise her film represents.

A bit later in the film we see the women hanging a curtain around one of the many "observation" towers in West Berlin from which East Berlin can be seen. A crowd of tourists gather to see the view. We hear Beethoven's "Song of Joy" playing triumphantly on the sound track. The crowd mounts the stairs to the tower. When the curtain is pulled back they see an utterly commonplace and ordinary vision of the "other side." The crowd's anticipation gives way to quiet disappointment and letdown, and they depart immediately.

In her review of *THE ALL-AROUND REDUCED PERSONALITY*, B. Ruby Rich has commented on this scene:

“Why should the charged vision of Berlin's frightened twin across the wall be diminished by the women's curtain, while the Grand Canyon is enlarged by Cristo's more famous one? It is a riddle to how monumentality is defined, and how non-concrete the political in fact proves to be, even with a wall to help out in fixing its borders.”[\(3\)](#)

By diminishing the monumentality of East Berlin, the curtain emphasizes the wall's monumentality. That is, the ordinariness of the view of East Berlin, its very likeness to West Berlin, disconcerts tourists, who come to West Berlin looking for a peep show into the East. But if East Berlin does not appear to be the sinister, dark shadow of West Berlin it is touted as, the photography collective's tactic should force tourists to view the wall and its monumentality as all the more imposing. Edda and her friends hoped that visually apprehending the similarities between the East and West would have helped tourists focus on the painful absurdity of the political situation which the wall is a monument to. But the tourists don't come to this conclusion. The deliberate absurdity of the women's conceptual art-joke becomes lost on the tourists — presumably because they lack the social or political sensitivity and sympathy to follow the conceptual thread of the women's intention. After the tourists leave, Edda and her friends feel deflated and downcast. Such a mood betrays the naiveté of their original optimism and seems to contradict their own political sophistication. Yet the scene touches us with its quiet black humor.

After one particularly vexing day, we watch Edda climb into bed. The narrator quotes from the East German novelist Christa Woolf:

"Only constant effort gives meaning to the units of time in which we live."

As we wonder how much consolation these words really offer, in the next frame we learn it's only enough to get asleep on. Edda is awakened by her roommate at the behest of a city paper that needs her to cover one of the city's nightly tragedies. But the next day we discover that this paper or some other has been publishing her pictures without credit or payment. In light of this incident, Christa Woolf's words about constant effort resonate with cynicism. In the context of the film the words function as a double entendre. If constant effort gives meaning to the units of time in which we live, what gives meaning to constant effort? A respite from constant effort, pleasure, self-reflection? Edda has virtually no time for these. She is not only beset by financial anxieties and artistic and parental responsibilities but by employers who cheat her. On another level, the viewer is prompted by the Christa Woolf citation to ask similar questions about the film. By having Edda question her existence in such a way, Sander is holding up a mirror to the audience, inviting us to ask similar questions about the film. For example, is it our constant effort that gives meaning to Sander's tableaux?

When the women in Edda's group decide to give up on the arts council, Edda goes to speak to the head of a private advertising agency in order to get the kind of promotion her group needs. She tells the director how it took two years for her group to be recognized by the arts council. She explains how finally, after receiving funding, the women have reason to believe that their financial support is being withdrawn from them because their photos do not show derelict German women. As they put it, they want to show the

"interdependence of the GDR, East and West Germany, Berlin as the last outpost of democracy as a German Las Vegas or Disneyland."

The director only responds,

"I would have thought movement women would tackle 'women's issues.'"

The women who work for the arts council had exploited them by promoting the socially sanctioned inequity of paying women less than men for the same job. Now this man, who represents the male world of free capitalistic enterprise — like the arts council — can't make the required leap of imagination to realize or invent a connection between feminist issues and what he would consider "larger" political ones. He would like to pigeonhole Edda's photo project into the very slot she and her friends had resisted being forced into by the arts council.

As a last resort, the women of the photography collective decide that

making contacts in the art world might help their cause. So a few of them go one night to a gallery opening to get some feedback on their billboard campaign. We see one of Edda's companions being drawn into conversation by two bearded men, assuring her,

"Berlin is no longer window dressing for the East. Things have got to be as good on the inside as the outside."

Another friend meets up with a woman who belongs to the arts council that has cut off their funding. This woman tells Edda's friend that her organization expected the women's photography group to show

"the working people, women of Berlin, not the wall or negative impressions."

These remarks register as tacitly accepted social views. The cocktail party ambiance of the gallery in which they are uttered reinforces their resonance as empty phrases of bourgeois respectability. By this point in the film we have become so familiar with Sander's use of wry irony to parody liberalism and to expose its hypocrisies that we hear in even the most plausible-sounding statements the hollow clink of liberal slogans. And as the woman states a disapproval of the "negative impressions" that the photos present, we hear more sinister overtones — overtones of a desire for amnesia, a regressing of the reality of history.

In the film's final episode, Sander's subtle but effective attack on liberalism culminates. Edda has attracted the attention of a middle-aged photographer. He is familiar with her work and takes it upon himself to advise her from the vantage point of one who has "made it." At first he is courtly. His appearance is that of a once-striking, roguish yet dignified man who has grown softly flaccid and resigned over the years. He tells Edda he knows a lawyer who can advise her on the legal aspects of continuing the billboard project, and he motions her to come with him. Following the conventions of a pickup, Sander cuts to a shot of this man and Edda sitting together at a restaurant table. The male photographer is drinking, Edda not. He tells Edda how he'd had a successful first exhibition but that the critics panned his second one as too provocative politically and aesthetically. He said he missed the recognition he'd begun to receive. So he began to tailor his work to suit critics' tastes, but he soon found "a kind of pluralism had begun to creep into his work." Even though he has compromised his artistic integrity, he tells Edda that he admires her courage to do what she is doing and that she should continue it. This man's account of himself, delivered in a dry, slightly craven tone of voice, admits to defeat and a sense of failure for having compromised. But it also reveals his arrogance and egotism for the public success and acceptance awarded him. The flat tone of his candor suggests that he does not experience or he has suppressed the moral conflict produced by the contradictions he's chosen to live with.

When he nonchalantly moves his hand to cover Edda's, the look of a cornered animal comes over her face. By the time they reach her doorstep, he seems overtaken by desperation to sexually possess Edda.

He forces himself on her, and they wrangle with each other briefly until she manages to break free. The standard Hollywood shot following this struggle at the door would be of Edda and the photographer waking up in bed the next morning. Instead of this, the camera shows us Edda's vomiting in the gutter. Her big, black coat flaps about her and cars whiz past in the night. That incident has provided just the kind of gritty catharsis she needs, as much as the drink she goes to get at her neighborhood bar, an image which adds a final note of bravado to the episode.

To see Edda's vomiting in the street provides one of the most memorable and important moments in the film. The intensity of Edda's reaction signals a repulsion that exceeds a woman's anger as object of unwanted sexual advances. Though the male photographer claims that he respects Edda for not compromising herself artistically, his sexual aggression suggests an underlying hostility about the fact that she hasn't compromised and he has. It's as if by getting her sexually, he could even the score. Edda's reaction is to that hostility, to the male photographer's desire to compromise her integrity and identity as an artist by compromising her sexually.

Moreover, the image of Edda's vomiting in the street violates the taboo against women performing or being seen doing things which are unsightly or unattractive. This taboo exists to conceal the negative effects produced by women's socialization. To violate it exposes the cultural oppression which makes women both psychically and physically sick. And the shock of such an image reveals how our culture would ordinarily repress the symptoms of women's malaise as well as the causes.

Finally, it is this shot of Edda vomiting in the gutter that makes explicit the conceptual connection between the photography collective's interest in the wall and feminism.

As we have seen, the wall's very ubiquity and "naturalness" make it a metaphor for the way repression is rendered invisible by the consensual acceptance of it. The image of Edda's vomiting crystallizes our identifying this metaphorical meaning of the wall with the way sexism is rendered invisible, as societies accept as "natural" the social oppression of women. The image of Edda's vomiting ruptures the taboo that maintains this naturalization. So, too, the women's pictures of the wall stand as an effort to deconstruct the naturalization of social repression.

It is a remarkable achievement that Sander does not conflate her analysis of the culture (developed through an examination of Edda's life) with Edda's own relation to the events of her life and the culture she inherits. This shot of Edda's vomiting and the pictures the women have taken of the wall are, in a sense, metaphorically homologous — leading the viewer, by the end of the film, to interpret the wall as a symbol for the photography collective's struggle, and therefore, by extension, the women's struggle. However, it is to Sander's credit that the wall is never directly appropriated by Edda and her friends as a symbol of women's

struggle. Such a move would be self-aggrandizing and melodramatic, an artificial rounding off of the complexities and contradictions that women's lives are entangled by. Moreover, such a move on the part of the characters would probably limit and interface with the political perspective and understanding that Sander so carefully constructs through her cultural critique.

It is impressive that Sander does not conflate her analysis of West German culture with Edda's relation to it, especially considering Sander's double role as director and as Edda. Avoiding this conflation, Sander lets us know that it is the viewer's and not Edda's interpretation that establishes the wall both as the central metaphor of the film and a symbol of Edda's group's struggle. The distance which Sander maintains between her character's perspective and her own as director emphasizes that it is Sander's cultural critique that makes such a symbolic interpretation possible. Yet, for Sander, it would seem, it is the perceptions generated by this critique rather than the symbolism supported by it that in the final analysis are decisive.

Notes

[1.](#) Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," In *Notes on Women's Cinema*, ed. C. Johnston, *Screen Pamphlet 2* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973), reprinted in Patricia Erens, ed., *Sexual Stratagems* (New York: Horizon, 1979).

[2.](#) The film had a subtitle REDUPERS, which in English means "outtakes," or the footage that was shot but not included in the final film. Sometimes the film is referred to, in both German and English criticism, solely as REDUPERS, perhaps because it's conveniently short. Also, REDUPERS is an abbreviation of *Reduzierte Persönlichkeit* (Reduced Personality).

[3.](#) B. Ruby Rich, "Up Against the Walls," *Chicago Reader*, 11 April 1980.

Redupers Contradictory reality

by Uta Berg-Ganschow
translated by Ramona Curry

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We are united in our demand that feminist film — if such a thing exists-should "make women's authentic experiences tangible."[\(1\)](#) But that's about as far as unity goes, for some can think of authentic experiences only in terms of positive ones, as women's autonomy realized in an alienated world, as the "inner explosive of a woman who breaks out, whom no one can beat down." Authenticity here is the "primeval and essential feminine gift, which allows itself to be reduced by no one and nothing."[\(2\)](#)

Are triumphs more authentic than defeats?

Others see a more precise portrayal of life primarily in portraying experiences of suffering, humiliation, and defeat. But so far not all women do. Are the "spiritual exhalations of rich bourgeois women" less authentic than those of, for example, a working woman who suffers from physical violence?[\(3\)](#) Is it ultimately a question of class, after all, rather than sex distinctions? Does authentic experience first deserve having that description when from below the lower middle class? If the demand for authentic experience is to be more than an emotional salutation to an otherwise alienated reality, that demand must also incorporate reality's contradictions. Everything else would be a fantasy about autonomy, a pleasant self-image bargained for in exchange for reality.

In REDUPERS Helke Sander shows women's experiences as consisting of the experience of contradictions, oppositions, and limitations. Her film has been praised and criticized for the wrong reasons. While some film journalists quickly attached to it the label "women's film," some women were unable to identify in it their feminist ideals. They missed

the strong, optimistic, model woman and wanted the women's film as imagination's head start towards better times. Should "the all-round developed individual" (Marx), to which Helke Sander's film certainly refers, be presented under the Christmas tree only after communism has been achieved? Or isn't it already possible to present alternatives and gain different perspectives? An alternative sensibility and the personality's full development, which woman's "fellow man" has apparently already reduced — couldn't women begin to achieve these now in the forefront in working with women, in playing with children, in associating with men?(4)

The film offers different perspectives and an alternative sensibility, but not in happily well-developed personality traits found in the heroine or other characters in the film. Instead, the film offers these alternatives as it develops, through sensually rich montage, the main figure's relation to the restrictive reality around her. Because this development does not establish a single version of reality for the viewers, it allows them to experience it for themselves.

Helke Sander shows social and economic reality as a determining factor of individual experience. This is not done in the manner of social-realist workers' films, not by having her characters embody political-economic theses.(5) But her film is also not a hymn of praise to individualism able to defend itself successfully against alienating society. Helke Sander doesn't force the viewer to regard as a matter of fate the relation between social forces and individual opportunities for growth (or the diminishing of these) as is common in narrative cinema. REDUPER's strength, its sensual and intellectual attraction, lies instead in the fact that, repeatedly, new sides, new views of society as well as of the individual, become apparent. It lies in the fact that the film's montage presents familiar experiences from particular contexts in a new way — distanced, changed. The essential dramaturgical concept of the film, which enables us to identify the many-faceted montage with the many-faceted reconstructions — or rather deconstructions — of reality, rests on the fact that the main character, Edda, is a photographer and her women's group, a group of photographing women.

Helke Sander's film — film photography of photographing women — uses the production of pictures not only on the level of subject matter, photographers' milieu. The photos not only provide material for or the occasion of a story (as, for example, in BLOW UP). The duplication of the medium and the subject also goes beyond being a cineaste's in-joke (as in Wender's KINGS OF THE ROAD). The essential difference lies in the fact that the mediation of reality, the film's subject, recurs on the levels of film montage. Breaks, ironic distancing, and elements of alienation, which arise from the continually new montage of image and sound, illustrate in a double sense for the viewer new views of reality. The single elements of montage (image-dialogue-sound; image-narration; image-music) are frequently themselves the result of montage. Examples on the visual level include the large photo of the wall placed in front of the wall and the view through the theater curtain

of East Berlin. On the level of sound, there are radio broadcasts from East and West brought into confrontation and literary quotations introduced into the ongoing voice-over narration.

One level of montage — the one of subtle self-irony, semi-resignation, and pointed commentary — interprets and corrects the visual meaning but not only by providing additional information. The commentary and image together form rather a third composite, with no attempt made at making this seem naturalistically probable. The commentary thus detracts nothing from that which is shown, not even where it serves to distanciate. Rather, it places that which is shown in alternative contexts. Viewers cannot blindly accept one or another of the texts — sound/image/dialogue/music — as valid in and of itself. The viewer instead has to figure out the meaning of the montage for herself/himself, as, for example, when the camera tracks along the desert along the Berlin Wall to triumphantly swelling music by Beethoven. Rarely in REDUPERS is a montage so complicated that one is totally preoccupied with trying to catch even halfway the single montage elements. However, this is the case in the sequence in which three scenes from different films by women are simultaneously projected onto a newspaper clipping reporting atomic catastrophes, while a voice reads a letter reporting the private catastrophe of "Aunt Katharina." (This sequence is an homage to the makers of the three films and also to the montage methods of Godard's NUMERO 2.) What the film otherwise gradually relates sequence by sequence — the situation of a woman unable to devote herself entirely to any one thing — is turned here in this sequence almost aggressively against the viewers, overwhelming them with information.

Two examples will illustrate how the film portrays reality through demonstrating how reality is produced. A voice over prepares the viewer in an ironic and distanciated manner for "a newsworthy event" — the last steam locomotive travels from Berlin to Hamburg. For the viewers, there are two levels of images: we see three photographers watching for a locomotive which is out of sight.

Voice-over: "A shot with the telephoto lens over the border.
It's still the wrong train."[\(6\)](#)

Now and again the different levels of perceptions or appearances coincide within the context of the film. The viewer now looks along with the photographer through the telephoto lens to "the other side"; the film camera lens and the camera lens become identical. Then again there's double perception: viewers see how the photographers continue to watch to no avail for the "event." The result of this montage is this. Viewers can experience for themselves the working situation of three photographers standing around freezing near the Berlin Wall, drinking something to keep warm, waiting to capture a particle of reality which as an event is to be published for thirty-two marks per piece.

A similar process occurs in a more extended sequence in which the women's group is beginning its photo-action. The photographic

facsimile of reality — of the Berlin Wall — is juxtaposed against that reality as a billboard-sized photograph. According to the dialogue and the commentary, the women expect from this confrontation to be able to evaluate how well their photos of Berlin capture its reality.

(The photo is placed successively in front of a wall covered with advertisements, in front of the Berlin Wall itself, in front of a wall of a private estate, then of an industrial complex, and finally in front of a military installation.)

This test occurring before the viewer brings out the social realities of those who are concerned with reality. In that which appears to be a disturbance, an annoying interruption of work, a breakdown, emerges the women's special relation to society. A woman who's working on photomontage has to go pick up her child, at which another in the group snarls at her,

"Oh man, couldn't you just once leave your kid all day Sunday with your ex-husband. I think it's a terrible disturbance every time one of you drags her child along!"

Another woman has wet feet; all are disappointed and unsure because the work isn't going right. "Edda has the wrong lens." [\(7\)](#) One is dubious about the outcome of the work.

While they are trying to capture Berlin's reality, they are tripped up by their own social and psychic reality. The film montage overlays these levels and turns their original meaning around. The women's small subjective problems take on objective contours bit by bit, montage element by montage element, as the supposedly official objective reality becomes individually grasped through the process of authentic experience.

But this also means that there can be no compromise in emancipation, no partial reconciliation of individuality, desire for self-fulfillment, and social constraints. Helke Sander's main character can neither attain a feminist conquest nor without damage become integrated into the social power structures. For her there is no happy ending — but there is also no neat, final catastrophe. Helke Sander has organized everyday chaos as a film experience which doesn't allow that chaos to disappear behind the conventions of narrative film.

Notes

[1.](#) Gertrud Koch, "Ein Reich authentischer Bilder," *Medium*, no. 12 (1978), p. 41.

[2.](#) Alexandra Kluge, "Die alizeitig ...," *Filmfaust*, no. 7 (1978), p. 37.

[3.](#) Esther Dayan, "Zu flink einsetzender Beifall," *Courage*, no. 4 (1979), p. 38.

[4.](#) Julia Dech, "Die allzeitig ...," *Kassandra*, no. 1 (1978), p. 8.

5. Compare Ursula Bachor and Helge Heberle's "Berliner Arbeiterfilm" *Frauen und Film*, no. 6, p. 197.

6. (Translator's note) "... the wrong train"; in German, "Es ist immer noch der falsche Zug." This is a pun on the common German word for train, "Zug," which also means "move" as a noun, as in, "What's your next move?"

7. (Translator's note) "... the wrong lens"; in German, "Edda hat das falsche Objektiv." This is a pun on the German word for lens, "Objektiv," which, as an adjective in German (but not as a noun), has the same meaning as "objective" as an English adjective, e.g., as in, "Be objective," or in, "The Objective (Subjective) Factor."

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Sing, Iris, Sing Women learning men's work

by Gretchen Elsner-Sommer

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Tight close-up on a smiling woman's face. Machine factory noises in the background.

The camera zooms out to show the woman dressed in a white blouse, a tight skirt, and high-heeled shoes. The softness of the woman's smile and dress contrasts with the austerity of the machines that surround her.

A man stops to talk to her. "Change your shoes," he says. His voice is barely audible over the noise of the equipment. The woman walks by another man. "Change everything," he says.

These images and sounds occur in just the first few seconds of an incredibly long take which begins the film *SING, IRIS, SING*. This West German documentary glimpses Germany looking at itself — an interesting corollary to the new German cinema features that have become so popular here.

SING, IRIS, SING follows women through five weeks of a government-sponsored retraining program. They are studying to become skilled metal workers or electronic workers. In an uncomplicated style, the camera depicts the obstacles that these women face in the classroom and at home. This is not a self-reflexive film, nor does it answer all the questions that it poses. Rather, it demands a great deal from the viewer, who doesn't realize until the final scenes that all but five of the women do fail.

SING, IRIS, SING offers a false sense of comfort that is only dispelled by the still images that conclude the film. Throughout we get glimpses into the ease with which women help each other, their honesty in dealing with the program's difficulties. The relaxed relation that they have with the camera creates a sense of normalcy and comfort. Seemingly none of these shots prepare the audience for the women's final failure.

Initially thirty-two women began this program. At the time filming started, only eighteen were left in the course. By the end of the program, only five women were to become metal workers, and none were to pass the test to become electronic workers. Such a high rate of failure is alluded to many times in the film by the women themselves as they relate their experiences. However, only in the final scenes does the audience realize the hugeness of the failures. That final recognition leaves a disquieting sense that seems oddly to go hand in hand with the honesty, sincerity, and strength that we've seen these women share.

The opening shot provides a metaphor for the comfortable but also disquieting effect that the film has on the audience. As the long take continues down through the machine shop, one woman joins arms with another. Together they walk down a long hall and into a dressing room. Without a single cut, the camera stays with them as the first woman changes into workers' garb. Often the women look at or refer to the camera but are obviously at ease with its presence. This long, uninterrupted take continues as the women walk back to the shop and take up their stations at the machines. The women seem to assume easily the vast changes they are initiating into their lives. By changing their clothes and entering into a machine world, a world traditionally accessible only to men, the women also introduce tension into their lives, a tension that cannot be fully understood by the women, the filmmakers, or the audience until the final figures are in.

The first indication of something "askew" comes shortly after the first scene. One of the teachers is talking about a student whom he has just tested and he says that the student could learn the material but lacks concentration. While the teacher talks, the camera cuts to a medium shot of the woman at work. The woman appears pensive, obviously not involved completely with her work. The camera pauses only a second, then cuts away to an entirely different scene, where we see a group of women sitting around a table solving math problems. We've had no time to think about the former scene. The camera has moved on without comment. It's only after the film that the audience may have time to reflect, "Why couldn't she concentrate? Shouldn't teachers be aware of the circumstances shaping students' attitudes?"

The filmmakers offer no running commentary; no narrator comments on the images. Rather, images are allowed to speak for themselves. Only the bare essentials of the story get spoken by a voice over as the film progresses. Printed titles punctuate the film with information about the content and duration of the women's course of study. While the audience watches without a narrator to lead, viewers are seemingly free after viewing the film to evaluate the images just seen.

These images are rendered in black and white, captured by cinema vérité techniques of long uninterrupted shots and sweeping pans. No montage or quickly edited sequences manipulate viewers' reactions. The editing appears minimal. Several wide pans pick up the members of the camera crews, and even those shots are not cut out. Presumably this

authenticates the unedited form which the filmmakers want to portray. Such a camera style produces images that seem only to recreate what is in front of the camera and not to revise it.

I do not mean that the film is presented without comment by the filmmakers, for the film is full of visual commentary. By choosing which government program to focus on, by selecting which classes would be shot and which women would be interviewed, the filmmakers clearly offer opinions.

Why did these women fail? Again and again the filmmakers show us scenes heavy with future failure. But the reasons are not spelled out, although we see a series of possible trip-ups. Often teachers, students, and even the filmmakers so gloss over these reasons that the viewer may become aware of them only after the film is over.

In retrospect, the film has answers, although it never gave an appearance of having looked for them. The film shows how these women lack confidence and, without confidence, they cannot concentrate because they must constantly ask themselves,

"Am I doing the right thing? Am I capable of doing this work? Should I be doing something else more suited to my education or to my role as a mother?"

For example, like many other women in the program, Doris left school many years ago, before having completed her course work. Now she has to seek assistance in math from her teenage son. Annette relates that by the time she gets home at night, prepares dinner for her son, and helps him with his homework, she feels too tired to do her own work. She has more confidence in herself as a mother than as one striving for a man's position.

These attitudes are best visualized in the first long scene of women studying math together. The material is different, but the women can share their knowledge and help each other. After they work on math for some time, one woman decides to leave, saying, "I think I would rather be home peeling potatoes." It is a funny, honest line but becomes poignant when we realize that "peeling potatoes" offers a position in which many women feel safe, a role that always provides an acceptable retreat for women who do not have the self-confidence to move beyond it.

Through a series of interviews with the women in the program, the audience learns that they receive little support from their relationships with men. Iris tells us that her husband locks her in their apartment at night. Agnes, on the other hand, is assured of her fiancé's support. He is a skilled mechanic and can help her with her difficulties in the technical courses. But she does not tell a very convincing story. During the time that Agnes talks about him, he stands away from her and looks away. He seems uninterested in her words and walks around her in the bar, getting ready to go to his own job. In the shots of them together at home,

he stays busy helping clean up. This is an admirable trait; however, he ignores the camera, his fiancée, and their work together. Agnes tries to assure the audience (and perhaps herself) that her fiancé really supports her because he allows her to get angry. This self-indictment points up her lack of confidence. She cannot approve her own anger but only condones it through the approval of the man she lives with.

In a long sequence near the end of the film, Doris and her husband Helmut have a long argument. This scene provides a central example of the obstacles the women are up against and how they choose to deal with them. Helmut offers an idea, a mistaken and denigrating one, about Doris's work. Doris tries to explain to him that he is wrong. She calmly and repeatedly explains that she is the one taking the course, and she knows what she is studying. The camera slowly pans back and forth between the couple, passing over empty beer bottles, to catch the argument's every word. No tension-raising editing focuses the viewers' attention on high points, for the argument has no high points. Doris refuses to get angry at her husband's lack of support, understanding, or approval.

As the camera slowly wavers back and forth between the two, the viewer could understand some of the combat inside these women's heads. On the one hand, the women want to learn this work. On the other, everywhere they meet the attitude that any work they do outside the home is unimportant. Until women get angry and find the strength in their anger to move forward, they waver like the camera in this scene between two points.

The women, however, don't feel comfortable with anger. When Annette, as spokesperson for the group, voices an angry complaint about teaching methods, her fellow students oust her. Her outbursts have led the others to distrust her ability to represent them. Ultimately she is forced out of the program because of medical reasons, which seems to give final proof that anger will undo you.

No wonder the women shy away from anger. Whenever they complain, the brunt of the problem is almost always thrown back at them. They complain to the teacher that he does not go over homework assignments in class. He retorts that they don't do all their assignments, so what's the use? Students say that the teacher did not explain the material properly; the teacher proclaims that they should ask more questions.

While the teachers verbally encourage the women to concentrate and to continue, the teachers show no understanding of the pressures that these women are under. Nor do teachers question their material or how it is being presented. They seem to have little awareness of how unprepared these women are to deal with the difficulties of technical material.

This government program ostensibly has been set up to help women. Its failure looks like the women's fault. Yet, with the incredibly high failure rate, the viewer must look beyond such a simplistic answer. We must

study and hold accountable the program itself, the teachers, husbands, society, and the women's own inner barriers if we will find out the true reasons.

For the English-speaking audience the title of the film FRAUEN LERNEN MÄNNERBERUFE (WOMEN LEARN MEN'S JOBS) has been changed to SING, IRIS, SING. The English title removes a sense of striving for change and replaces it with a tableau of a woman singing.

The English title refers to the only staged shot in the film. Iris is sitting on a chair looking at an empty sofa. An Elvis Presley song, "Are You Lonesome Tonight," plays in the background and Iris sings along. In this melancholy image, we see Iris definitely finding some comfort and security in this song and the ritual of singing it. The only place in the film that any of the women can find such sense of security is in a staged shot — a bitter commentary. For Iris, security means singing a sad and lonely song. Although her singing brings her familiar contentment, it brings her no understanding of why her loneliness is alleviated in artificial surroundings and with sad songs.

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Critical dialogue *The Verdict*

by Dave Linn and Phyllis Deutsch

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THE VERDICT as social critique

— Dave Linn

I beg to differ with certain points made in Phyllis Deutsch's very witty and well-written piece on *THE VERDICT* (JC 28). Her depiction of the film as a "white knight against the system formula" is an oversimplification, and perhaps an unfortunate one.

The piece is absolutely correct in pointing out that Galvin is a very corrupt character functioning in a very corrupt system. Deutsch is likewise correct in identifying Galvin's breaches of personal and professional ethics within the context of the film — most notably jeopardizing his clients' wishes and welfare in the interests of his own self-aggrandizement. But she misses, despite this, the fact that Galvin, while not an altogether unsympathetic character, is not in any real sense a hero. His victory comes not through his own efforts so much as in spite of them. If there is a "white knight" in this film, it is not the lawyer, but the jury (i.e. the people) who somehow consistently try to do justice in the face of a corrupt and elitist legal system.

Deutsch's characterization of the film as a "fairy tale" is, I think, correct in a technical sense. In the real world, the defense, having succeeded in excluding all of Galvin's relevant evidence, would be entitled to a directed verdict — which would deny the jury a role in the proceedings. But the point of the fairy tale, which Deutsch explicitly misses, is that the people — the jury — will protect their own if they are given even the slightest chance of doing so, notwithstanding the ineptitude, corruption, and evil which permeate the lawyers and the courts. Looked at from this perspective, the film is a progressive piece rather than a reactionary one.

Even more unfortunate perhaps is Deutsch's failure to see the strength and complexities of the character Laura as played by Charlotte Rampling. As in her earlier role in *THE NIGHT PORTER*, Rampling

portrays with masterful skill the dilemma faced by an ordinary and well-meaning person placed into a world which is so consummately evil that evil appears to become the sine qua non for survival. In *THE VERDICT*, Laura is presented as an idealistic young legal worker who is persuaded to act as hired gun for the corporate firm in the name of a greater good — i.e., so that the corporate firm will have money to provide free legal services for the poor. In the process, she betrays herself, her friend, and justice, and so suffers collapse. Here, the fairy tale is realistic. The corporate legal system has no place for idealists, and all idealists who tread therein are, in the film and in real life, bound to self-destruct. The fact that Laura is a woman, of which fact Deutsch makes much, is not relevant to this thesis. Implicit in Laura's experience as portrayed in the film is the corollary presented by Galvin's own prior (and parallel) idealism and fall from grace.

(Incidentally, Deutsch mentions Galvin's downfall as his having been falsely accused of jury tampering. My recollection is that he admitted to having been at least partially guilty of this — a fact of importance, since it extends the parallel between his own corruption and that of Laura).

The dilemmas faced by Laura are to some degree faced by every principled person who functions on a day-to-day basis within the legal system. Rampling's power is her ability to make us identify with her failure and despair as a cathartic device. Ultimately we come out of the theatre not as failures ourselves, but as people who are alienated and enraged by the system. A film like this, using Rampling's acting as a shock absorber for our own despair, can free us to feel renewed rage. Rampling's ability to do this is unique among U.S. screen actors in my experience, and I think she deserves a lot more credit than she's been given by mainstream (or left) reviewers.

Again, I would underscore that the moral of the fairy tale which is *THE VERDICT* is to seek justice not under law, but in spite of it.

An anti-woman film

— Phyllis Deutsch

I would like to believe, along with Dave Linn, that the hero of *THE VERDICT* is indeed "the people." However, there's no evidence for such a reading in the body of the film. Linn's contention that the jury's "guilty" verdict shows that "the people will protect their own" exists in a vacuum. My review demonstrated that the racist, sexist slant of the film completely undercut its pretensions to progressive politics. Given this reactionary context, the "guilty" verdict of the jurors can best be interpreted as a romantic sell-out on the part of the filmmakers.

Linn's analysis is tied to the de-sexing of the Charlotte Rampling role. He says that the fact that Laura is a woman is not relevant to his thesis. If this is so, Linn's leftist perspective is incomplete. The sex of human beings — in art or in life — always matters. Laura may be an idealistic

young lawyer, but she is also a female who sleeps with Calvin, and whose betrayal of him therefore carries with it a range of nasty psychosexual implications. And of course, a man's punching a woman in the mouth (and drawing blood) is not the same as a man's punching a man. The power dynamic is completely different.

A film, a book, or anything else is not progressive if it is anti-woman. What Abigail Adams said to John prior to his assuming the presidency should be inscribed, forever, on the minds of male leftists: Don't forget the ladies!

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UCLA Gay & Lesbian Media Conference

by John Ramirez and Larry Horne

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The UCLA Gay & Lesbian Media Conference took place during the last weekend of January 1983. It had an urgent agenda intended to address the status of gay and lesbian representation in film and television studies. The three-day conference was preceded by a weeklong program of films presenting an historical cross-section of national cinemas, film movements, styles, and both independent and commercially acclaimed directors. This cross-section was designed to suggest possible parameters for critical inquiry. The combined events offered a valuable occasion for gay studies' contributing to the field of critical film studies, raising questions about the previous silence regarding the representation of "marginal" sexuality.

In recognition of this silence, the UCLA Gay & Lesbian Media Coalition had been established in the fall of 1981. The Coalition members, all graduate students in the UCLA Motion Picture/ Television Studies Program, are: Claire Aguilar, Chris Berry, Don Diers, Larry Horne, John Ramirez, together with the assistance of Robert Rosen, director of the UCLA Film, Television and Radio Archives. The conference was funded by a grant from the California Council for the Humanities and hosted by the UCLA Department of Theater Arts.

The circumstances that led to the conference emerged from Coalition members' shared inquiry into film studies methodologies. In relation to the analytical field comprised of Marxist aesthetics, Althusser, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, semiotics, post-structuralism, and feminist criticism, we asked, what are the possible positions of alignment and opposition, of contribution and variance posed by "homosexual" representations? What new challenges are posed to the field of representational analysis by the practices of gay and lesbian media critics?

In trying to address these questions, the conference sought to fill a void in existing critical practice. The conference was far more strategic than

simply another pooling of gays and lesbians together, under the aegis of a "community celebration," for the purposes of self-edifying entertainment with gay themes, movies, and personalities. This event's uniqueness rested in the mandate to clarify what we mean by a gay and lesbian aesthetic and to establish appropriate critical categories.

Because of its unprecedented nature, the conference had a very broad scope and consequently an overburdened agenda. Without models to draw upon for its organization, the conference at times tended toward imprecision and generality in its attempts to map out a relatively uncharted terrain. Nevertheless, in providing a forum for the previously obscure, diffuse, and inchoate critical articulations about gay and lesbian representation, the conference set into motion a long-awaited dialogue, one that requires further refinement and reworking. With such intentions in mind, conference panels were organized to allow discussion of the widest possible range of visual modes and representational practices.

On the first panel, "The Politics of Kitsch and Camp", each panel participant brought a diverse contribution toward defining a gay aesthetic according to his or her respective discipline. Dennis Altman (author of *The Homosexualization of America*, the Americanization of Homosexuality, 1982), one of the first figures to emerge in the early 70s on behalf of gay politics, spoke about establishing categories of gay themes in commercial films. Remaining at a level of theoretical generality, Altman drew from a number of current films (i.e., *VICTOR/VICTORIA*, *MAKING LOVE*, *ERNESTO*). The system of gay authorial-text-spectator relations he proposed could hardly be extended beyond its implicitly "essentialist" approach. Vito Russo (author of one of the few books of gay film criticism, *The Celluloid Closet*, 1981) continued along essentialist lines. He offered a more informed body of historical film facts, though he had an even less specific theoretical framework. Panel chair Robert Rosen (UCLA) began a significant debate with these approaches by suggesting terms to use for an ideological investigation of the issue. Positing "kitsch" and "camp" as dichotomous and separable sensibilities, Rosen sought to distinguish their often confused and conjoined features of conservatism (kitsch) and radicalism (camp). In a similar vein, Horne (UCLA) considered representations of transvestism as discursive strategies which undermine cinema's pervasive dynamics of heterosexual representational codes and spectator positioning.

On the panel, "Gay Interest Groups and the Television Networks", Kathryn Montgomery (UCLA) moderated an amiable discussion among panelists: Newt Deiter (The Gay Media Task Force), Phillip Gerson (Alliance for Gay Artists in the Entertainment Industry), Paul Leaf (independent television writer, director, producer of *SGT. MATLOVICH VS. THE U.S. AIR FORCE*, NBC, 1978), and Dick Martin (NBC's Broadcast Standards Dept.). Twenty years ago, in the paranoid wake of McCarthyism, the extent of gay presence on network television took the form of anonymous information leaks from within the industry to

recognized gay community spokespersons. Since then, the language and functions of network practices have developed to accommodate an open relation between the networks and gay interests.

Informed by a history of community grievances and network resistance, a practice of "balanced programming" has evolved. With regard to gay and lesbian images on television, "balanced programming" supports a symbiotic relationship between networks and the gay community. They cooperate to achieve positive homosexual representations on the basis of the networks' need for profitable ratings and agreeable public relations. In this context, the channels for dialogue between the networks and gay interests lie in a series of formalized procedures which are usually insulated by an administrative protocol that wards off "controversy" at all costs.

As a consequence of the priorities and compromises required to maintain this relation, gay imaging on network television submits to the dubious position of "non-advocacy." The panel proceeded to describe television's current parameters for handling of homosexuality. On television, some gay and lesbian representations strive to offer role models and above all sustain popular "entertainment value." Other characters "just happen to be gay," and their physical affections must never figure visually in the narrative's unfolding.

Chairing "Lesbian Images in Media," Andrea Weiss (programmer for the Living Cinema in New York and for the New York Independent Women's Film Festival) contributed her perspectives on the absence of lesbian images in current feminist avant-garde film. In characterizing the films *DAUGHTERS OF CHAOS* (Marjorie Keller) and *EMPTY SUITCASES* (Bette Gordon), Weiss identified their common lines of heterosexual feminist discourse. Although confronting issues of sexual difference and traditional feminine roles, these films primarily seek out "liberated" terms for cinematically representing heterosexuality. According to Weiss, a basic heterosexism informs feminist theory's tendency to disavow lesbian issues.

In contrast to *DAUGHTERS OF CHAOS* and *EMPTY SUITCASES*, Weiss referred to Sally Potter's *THRILLER* as offering an exemplary decoding of the terms of women's powerlessness. *THRILLER* can imagine its two female figures' erotically bonding to the exclusion of its male characters — a scenario finally attributable to Potter's own lesbian sensibility. However, Weiss in introducing a contradictory assertion opposed heterosexual assumptions in feminist film practice with a lesbian essentialism. From a practical perspective, Barbara Martineau (filmmaker, teacher and critic) traced causes and results of lesbian absence in radical independent documentaries. Filmmaker Barbara Hammer offered a final challenge to current feminist theory by proposing a seven-point schema toward a lesbian aesthetic. Hammer's agenda, grounded in personalized sociobiological categories, delineated the dimensions of touch, nature, adaptability, vaginal configurations, mother-daughter bonds, isolation/alienation, and adventure/risk-

taking. Each of these categories Hammer associated with the individual event of lesbian self-identification.

The issues raised by this series of critical lesbian positions generated a call for more precise parameters by which to define lesbian film practice. This call insisted upon an analytical agenda that would be more rigorous than merely referring to lesbian directors, and more historical than reducing textual components to metaphors of the body and erotic lesbian exchange.

Initiating this call was Janet Bergstrom (UCLA) who discussed Ulrike Ottinger's *MADAME X*. Using a broader historical approach, Bergstrom attempted to bridge feminist theory with social history by seeking specific cinematic and cultural categories with which to approach the film's design. Situating *MADAME X* in the context of postwar Germany, Bergstrom characterized that country's national division as informing a film practice in which sexuality is but one component within a range of factors affecting spectator identification. Bergstrom questioned the validity of a strictly lesbian reading by emphasizing specific historical moments and social movements that influence narrativity.

Lillian Faderman (Cal. State Fresno, and author of the influential *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Sixteenth Century to the Present*, 1981) added an additional historiographic model. Presenting legal, cultural, and textual evidence, Faderman mapped the changes since events in the late 1800s which inspired one legal tract and Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* and two subsequent film versions of Hellman's stage play. Faderman's analysis revealed the particular terms of the different socio-historical contexts out of which each version emerged.

Chairing "Ideology and Cultures: Case Studies," Bill Nichols (Queens University) joined Julianne Burton (U. CA. Santa Cruz) to propose a double narrative system in Hector Babenco's *PIXOTE* (Brazil, 1981). According to Nichols and Burton, in the film sexual marginality threatens to transgress bourgeois familial codes. However, given its depiction of femininity and maternal metaphor, the film also idealizes traditional heterosexual divisions and gender assignments.

Adding to this inquiry into Third World films and their impact on a gay sensibility, John Ramirez (UCLA) offered a reading of Octavio Cortazar's *EL BRIGADISTA* (Cuba, 1977) in which the narrative must place the film's central character firmly within the text's overriding rhetoric of masculinity — a rhetoric strictly codified in the terms of Hispanic culture. In *EL BRIGADISTA* narrative departures from this masculinity suggest that the film would align male homosexuality with the "feminine."

Attempting to redeem "classical narrative" from the fate of restoring the sexual status quo, Robin Wood (York University) presented a Freudian reading of the homosexual subtext in Martin Scorsese's *RAGING BULL* (USA, 1980). Characterizing the film as representing "constitutional

bisexuality," Wood decoded its terms of homosexual repression and the resulting neuroses of paranoia, misogyny, and violence. Although Wood's approach seemed locked into a social reflection model, he provocatively characterized the film as affirming the social order but as uncompromisingly critiquing the human costs and social inequities required to maintain that order.

Claire Aguilar (UCLA) investigated the signifying process in high fashion advertising for the way it makes a narrative out of social and sexual conventions. Through describing iconography, formal elements, and promotional strategies, Aguilar's analysis pointed to the need for studying other media to understand the ideological issues pervading our culture's representational apparatuses.

Additional presentations described the textual workings of *MAKING LOVE* (USA, 1982). Joseph Janangelo (NYU) was concerned with the film's attempt to align itself with dominant ideology by its reliance on allusions — all with marked degree of gay sensibility — to classical prose, poetry, and Hollywood film. Chris Berry (UCLA) focused on *MAKING LOVE*'s marketing and promotional strategies and consequent intra-textual workings of ideological cooptation.

Chairing "Dimensions of Pornography," Thomas Waugh (Concordia University) presented "Gay Pornography as Cultural History." Here Waugh argued for the political significance of gay male porn. Amassing male pornographic photographs from 1885-1954, Waugh demonstrated how they had been historically situated at intersections of art, commerce, and law. Thus such photographs serve as highly encoded sites for analyzing the production of gay male culture in 20th century capitalist society. Mapping pornography's shifting course from suppressed private consumption to its current public market space, Waugh questioned whether gay male porn's inclusion in public space renders it complicit with that space's patriarchal agenda, e.g. the exclusion of women's sexuality.

Richard Dyer (Warwick University, and editor of *Gays and Film*, 1977) also contributed an essay on pornography, read in absentia, suggesting that expressions of male sexuality in pornographic film inform a narrative context that basically upholds the exigencies of capitalist ideology and culture. Dyer's work seemed to suggest that representations of male sexuality, whether gay or non-gay, proceed within an ideologically privileged domain.

Jan Oxenberg and Lucy Winer (independent filmmakers working together on a project dealing with issues of pornography) touched on this problematic of male sexual privilege. Oxenberg and Winer questioned the prospects by which lesbian filmmakers may seize the means to look at other women within a representational order characterized by the masculine power to gaze at and possess women. Ultimately, the issue that prompted the most debate on the panel concerned gay men's ability and need to reassess their "masculine privilege" as they allied themselves with the lesbian community against

sexist forms of visual pleasure and sexual objectification.

The panel "Production and Distribution Practices" did not use the kind of theoretical language heard elsewhere. Practical concerns of finance and distribution strategies and options were the principal issues here. Panel chair James Boyle (USC) coordinated an impressive gathering of gay and lesbian film workers. Greta Schiller, currently directing *BEFORE STONEWALL* for the Public Broadcasting System, spoke on the benefits and limitations of federal funding and television affiliation which had affected her film's production and distribution. Screenwriter Barry Sandler (*MAKING LOVE*) assured the audience that his career has been well rewarded since his "coming out" with *MAKING LOVE*, allowing him both the means and encouragement to pursue independent production.

Donna Dietsch, presently working on an independent production of Jane Rule's novel *Desert of the Heart*, elaborated on the public relations and administrative complexities involved in raising adequate funding for a quality product, while at the same time preserving personal, political, and artistic integrity. Joe Gage, best known for slightly-better-than-average feature-length gay male pornography, spoke on the advantages of economic independence, which he gained by investing in more popular genres, such as low budget martial arts films that his New York company is recently promoting.

In its struggle to evaluate existing histories, the panel "Approaches to a Gay Film History" grappled with the various models on which historians may base their works (i.e. feminist, ideological, personal, popularist, assimilationist, gay essentialist). Although we had anticipated that the panel would clarify the functions, uses, and ideological underpinnings of such historiographic models, the panel gave way to an explosive argument about disparate priorities and academic standards. Discussing how covert gay readings could be made of conventional narratives, panel chair Al LaValley (UC Santa Barbara) credited directors such as Cocteau and Murnau for possibly having injected a gay sensibility into the historical development of narrative forms and styles. John Greyson (National Association of Lesbian and Gay Filmmakers) presented an essay on gay independent video; he dealt with the parameters of the video apparatus and situated the emergence of gay and lesbian video artists within their field, one that is not yet as rigidly codified and conventionalized as film.

Using Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* as a point of contention, Martha Fleming (critic, whose essay was read in absentia) characterized Russo's book as a quasi-subjective chronicling of gay characters lacking both methodological rigor and attention to lesbian specificity. Then Vito Russo made a heartrending self-defense. A consensus emerged from the audience urging that Russo not be held answerable for the problems his book inadequately addressed. Russo argued that such divisive energies would be more productive if they were properly directed to writing other works that took up neglected issues or ones needing historiographic

citation.

Since each speaker drew from a different method, the conference offered a spectrum of approaches. The terms of these debates shifted. There was a range of perspectives which located the fundamental issue either at the level of the image or at the level of analytic language. Repeatedly, the presentations and responses differed about the appropriate analytical frameworks for gay and lesbian representation. Such articulation of difference became a measure of the conference's significant contribution to the field of critical inquiry.

How are we to talk about gay and lesbian representations? There's an urgency in our claiming the "homosexual's" stake in the prevailing academic critical paradigm for determining the course of our future investments and contributions. The variety of people and interests represented at the UCLA Gay and Lesbian Media Conference means we have begun a landmark initiation of this task. Considering the multiple issues raised by gay and lesbian media representations and valuable dimensions and categories to film and media studies. It is an approach which can no longer remain peripheral to the field.

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The last word Finding and using the truth

by the Editors

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Many people from the United States have recently traveled to Nicaragua. Some are working there on a more or less permanent basis, contributing their skills to the reconstruction of the country. Others have gone down to pick coffee, a major export crop threatened by U.S. financed and directed contra raids from Honduras. Still others are participating in religious programs for peace by living as witnesses and visible foreign residents in isolated northern towns, where they could easily be killed by *contra* attacks.

Going down to Nicaragua in this way is an expression of social privilege. People need to have (or be able to raise) over \$1000 and be able to take time off from work and family responsibilities. Certainly many other people would go if it were possible, if, for example, our government supported the activity by making inexpensive transportation available. Nonetheless, those who do go on these trips want to demonstrate concretely and personally their solidarity with the Nicaraguan people and also see the Nicaraguan revolution with their own eyes. In return, we all benefit from their reports when they return.

As our government bombs Lebanon and moves ever closer to sending U.S. troops into combat in El Salvador and/or Nicaragua, the propaganda war escalates. Most people in the United States have the confused sense that they both know and do not know about U.S. military involvement abroad. By now everyone here knows something about Central America and Lebanon. But they find it hard to act on that knowledge and hard to wade through the constant flood of government and media lies. Those who travel to Nicaragua on work brigades, especially those who know Spanish, learn about that country through contact with ordinary people, sharing in their daily lives. This knowledge has all the immediacy of lived experience. It cuts through conflicting media reports, and it offers a direct experience of that reality which has become such disputed turf in the propaganda war.

The official U.S. line about governmental involvement abroad is not coherent; contradictory governmental reports make the news day after day. Any small exercise in comparison and contrast reveals the Big Lie. For example, the Secretary of the Navy proclaimed on February 13 that U.S. ships were shelling Lebanon to support the Gemayel government. Since the President's line is that we are only protecting U.S. citizens' lives, the Secretary of the Navy had to back down.

With an historical memory we can make another comparison — the ships are shelling civilian targets in Lebanon with cluster bombs, an "antipersonnel" weapon used extensively in Vietnam. These bombs are full of plastic pellets, which embed themselves in people's bodies and remain there for the rest of their life, causing intense pain and requiring lifetime care for the adult or child. The plastic pellets cannot be detected by X-rays and therefore cannot be found and removed. Such a weapon signals that the major U.S. military goal is directly to attack civilians — especially families and women — the caretakers of the traumatized in any war.

Recently former ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, testified to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Latin America that Salvadoran rightwing leader Roberto D'Aubuisson presided over a meeting of twelve men, among whom he supervised the drawing of lots for the "honor" of murdering Archbishop Oscar Romero. Then d'Aubuisson ordered a death squad to murder the assassin.

What does receiving such information mean to us or to the U.S. Congress? Clearly, the former ambassador knows a lot about our government's support of the Salvadoran government and its death squads. Now, under oath, White tells his story, but probably not all of it. He does it for honor, for conscience, for realpolitik, who knows? We're glad for the testimony because his voice reaches more people than we can. But he tells only what many people already know; he adds only a new graphic detail about drawing lots.

His testimony falls into a major genre of news here: a high official reveals previously hidden information. Usually the hidden information has already lost its usefulness. Decisions based on its absence have been made. Interestingly, these revelations tend not to undermine the ruling class' credibility, but rather reinforce notions about the openness, honesty, or objectivity of the press, which is never faulted for not having published such information much earlier. Yet since Vietnam and Watergate, these delayed revelations seem to contribute to a credibility gap. A healthy doubt exists in the way the public receives their leaders' words, which the media so faithfully report. People are more skeptical now.

We must ask not only where the truth lies but also of what use it is. The oppressed need the truth that those in power have a reason to hide. Under the influence of an actor in the White House, our government manipulates the media constantly. It labels its adversaries with pejoratives, and it lies. The media rarely challenges these tactics openly.

The labels we hear present every social and world conflict in stark terms of good and evil. Since the government has to be good, all opposition has to be bad. Often these labels blame the victim. By projection, our government and the media attribute to the oppressed the traits of the oppressor. Thus, "terrorists" attacked the Marine Headquarters in Beirut with a truck bomb, not indigenous citizens who wished to drive out the invaders. Although the Marines are there to prop up a minority rightwing government, yet are called Peacekeepers.

In a similar abuse of language, "routine exercises" covers massive deployments of troops and equipment in Honduras near its borders. Now we learn that permanent military bases are being established there. Sometimes events render lies useless. The administration no longer refers to the land reform or human rights certifications in justifying aid to El Salvador. The lie wasn't big enough to cover up the reality.

Other times, apparent cases of Soviet or Chinese "abuses" get excessive press. Remember the defecting Chinese tennis player? The amount of news space here is all out of proportion to the event's social importance. Isolated human or natural catastrophes in the Third World are also reported regularly in the news, but not the on-going catastrophes caused by imperialism. An overloaded bus careening off a mountain road or a monsoon make the news, but not the widespread malnutrition and illiteracy. Certainly not reported were the 360 Nicaraguan civilians killed in 1983 (often beheaded or dismembered and the body parts scattered to make burial impossible) by U.S.-sponsored invaders. In terms of pacing and "chunking" information, the isolated incident gets reported, but its connection to other areas that impinge upon it does not get analyzed at all.

Most important, the media rarely calls U.S. government lies, lies. These include germ warfare in Afghanistan, Bulgarians trying to kill the Pope, the Vietnamese sending all their captured helicopters to Nicaragua, or Soviet influence in (even direction of!) the U.S. anti-nuclear movement. Similarly, during the Vietnam War, we heard the Pentagon death count of the enemy outstrip Vietnam's population figures. In the news, such lies are often preceded by, "Informed Pentagon sources say..." or "Experts report that..." In fact, everyone who has been involved in a protest movement, from a strike to a sit-in, is skeptical of the news. Protestors easily see how the press distorts their activity and their motives. Such experiences make us rely on and build alternative sources of information that belie the government's version of social reality. For those working in the ecology and anti-nuclear movements, in anti-imperialist and anti-racist struggles, it becomes clear how the government's horrifyingly anti-life worldview disguises itself as a humanitarian one.

Those involved in resistance struggles need to find out and propagate the truth. Beyond relating isolated facts, they must develop and communicate to others an analysis of the social and political oppression that they and others experience. Here is where the resistance

movement's credibility lies. For example, the Nicaraguan government, weak in resources, cannot manipulate the worldwide capitalist-controlled information network like the U.S. government can.

The Sandinistas gain popular support by telling the truth, and the truth is impressive, considering their social gains. Furthermore, the very events of the revolution taught a lot of previously veiled truths. When the barricades are up and the ruling class murders those it had exploited, events speak class relations. Today the Nicaraguan people, many of whom recently learned to read, are hungry for news, not just for information but analysis. Providing information and analysis strengthens the Sandinistas' political position and builds ongoing support for the revolution.

In contrast, because truth serves the revolution in El Salvador more than it does either the U.S. or Salvadoran governments, military and government officials in El Salvador, as well as much of the population have to listen to the FMLN-FDR's Radio Venceremos just to keep informed of current events. The U.S. government clearly wishes to close down alternate sources of information. Thus U.S. Navy ships off the Salvadoran coast have powerful jammers which interfere with Radio Venceremos. Our government restricts travel to Cuba, closes Nicaraguan consulates, and denies a visa to Nicaraguan leader Tomas Borge. And when some revolutionary Central American leaders do come to this country to describe their people's situation, as with Minister of Culture Ernesto Cardenal's or three Central American trade unionists' visits to the San Francisco area, the local press usually does not report it. Furthermore, although solidarity groups, such as Casa El Salvador and CISPES translate and distribute detailed press releases from the FMLN-FDR and other information about the situation there, the commercial press disdains such sources of information which contradict U.S. Government reports.

Within the Marxist theory of dialectics, it is assumed that people's social position shapes any investigation they undertake. It also shapes the variety of and the importance assigned to the factors considered and the relevance attached to the various ties between factors. Beyond that, people master and use only those concepts which have some vitality for them because of their own lives.

For example, teachers who choose to teach an anti-imperialist film, such as EL SALVADOR: ANOTHER VIETNAM, take a first step toward combating disinformation. Beyond that, by now having a pedagogic stake in the issue, they have a more personal reason to develop their own ongoing awareness and analysis of events in Central America. As a result, terms, such as U.S. "imperialism" and "intervention," have an explanatory force for these teachers and some of their students which such words do not convey to those not so involved. Clearly, our government and the news media do not use these terms at all when discussing such issues as the International Monetary Fund, the Big Pine Games in Honduras, or elections in El Salvador.

An analysis of imperialism restores the "facts" reported in the news to their historical context and interconnectedness. We need to reestablish both our personal and collective memory and not "forget" like CBS news does. An analysis of imperialism lets us do this. But such knowledge presupposes our involvement in the struggle to abolish imperialism. Otherwise the news may anesthetize us, keeping us statically up-to-date with a daily dose of awful events. In such a case, watching the news every night on television merely reaffirms for us that we have gotten our socially necessary fix of the real world.

For people who have a personal commitment to end U.S. military involvement abroad and now want more information, a good source for such information comes from radical newspapers and magazines, which provide accurate and dependable reportage from the Third World. Best is the weekly *Guardian* (33 W 17th St., NYC 10011: 6 mo. sub, \$14.50). For those unfamiliar with or uncomfortable with the paper's left jargon, this will be a problem; but the coverage of events in the Third World is excellent and detailed.

The social democratic weekly, *In These Times* (1300 W. Belmont Ave., Chicago, IL, 60657: 1 year sub, \$29.50) is less consistent, but has published several good articles on Central America. More from a liberal point of view is *The Nation* (P.O. Box 1953, Marion, OH, 43305: 1 year sub, \$40) which has published several special issues on Central America. The best source of detailed, Marxist analyses of key issues and areas in Latin America, Central America, and the Caribbean is *NACLA's Report on the Americas* (151 W. 19th St., NY, NY, 10011: 1 year sub — 6 issues — \$15). And from a militantly Christian point of view comes the monthly *Sojourners* (PO Box 29272, Washington, D.C., 20017: 1 year sub, \$15) which has written extensively about Central America and whose editors have participated in the Witness for Peace program in Nicaragua.

All these magazines and papers are available on many newsstands and bookstore racks; most would be in public and university libraries. Also many daily newspapers from Europe and Canada are available in many such libraries. This press often provides more detailed coverage of international news than does the press here. Furthermore, the major Mexican periodicals report extensively on events in Latin and Central America. In these bourgeois journalistic traditions, the concept of U.S. imperialism has a broad social acceptance and analytic force which it does not have here. Radical bookstores carry a large selection of publications that have in-depth analyses and often detailed histories of countries in the Third World. For those of our readers who do not have access to such stores, we recommend the Modern Times Bookstore catalogue and bi-monthly booklists (968 Valencia, San Francisco, CA, 94110; \$3).

Gathering and providing radical information can transform established cultural institutions. Recently, we have seen a nation-wide response to the Artists Call in solidarity with Central American revolutions. In each

city, galleries and museums have organized programs about El Salvador and Nicaragua. A wide range of people participated in these shows, from established figures in the art world to solidarity workers providing resources, slide shows, and eyewitness reports. Artists Call has been a grassroots movement, with pluralistic views about how art and politics might mix. "Fame" and hierarchies in the art world were both used and broken down, since programs often consisted of "famous" crowd-drawing artists and people working in the local community. Everyone who had something to contribute could do so. In terms of a more long-range effect, the Artists Call events established new politicized networks among artists and solidarity workers here.

Learning about imperialism must relate to our deeper social needs. As we demand more from public institutions, we learn to gain effective social information for ourselves in an expanded and integrated way. Once we step out of paralysis, which is not so inevitable, and act collectively with others to change the conditions under which we live, our capacity for analysis surpasses merely receiving the "news." We then participate in a communications network which empowers us as it helps us shape our world.

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